激突のヘクセンナハト

OBSTACLEシリーズ

II

川上稔

イラスト／さとやす（TENKY）

協力／剣康之

電撃文庫

ハートを破壊された
魔法少女は
敗北となる……！

OBSTACLEシリーズ

激突のヘクセンナハトII

川上稔
イラスト／さとやす（TENKY）
協力／剣康之

The World's Fanfiction

A girl leaned forward in the reception sofa of the headmaster's office.

But she was not looking forward. She was staring at the enrollment form in front of her.

When she saw the motionless girl, the headmaster spoke up from by the window.

"What's causing you so much trouble, Miss Reese?"

"Oh, I was just thinking of abandoning my name."

"You mean like, 'Yes, I have abandoned my old name!'? Every time I see that, I end up thinking, 'How was anyone supposed to know? How about notifying them in advance?' "

"So do I. …But to make sure that doesn't happen, I was thinking of registering my new name here. But I don't know what name to choose…"

"Hmm." The headmaster tilted her head. "Your name is May Reese, right?"

"Yes, that's right. What about it?"

"How about Mary Sue?"

"…Does that mean something?"

"It does," confirmed the headmaster. "It's actually a term from the popular American TV show Star Maric."

"A term?"

"Yes. The show was about using Hand Power to resolve incidents between the stars or defeat foreign enemies. It was quite popular when I was in middle schoo-…when I was in college.”

“Headmaster… You don’t need to show off like that.”

“I am not showing off. It’s a matter of pride. …Anyway, Mary Sue was a character in a fanfiction for that show. She was a projection of the author’s desires, completely unbeatable, and skilled in every way. Every character loved her for no reason, but she was made to be so excessively amazing that people began using Mary Sue to refer to any original character in fanfiction that was a little too amazing.”

“Headmaster?” asked the girl. “If I take that name here, will I be skilled and unbeatable?”

“That is for you to show us, Mary Sue. But do you remember what else I said?”

“What?”

“A Mary Sue is loved by everyone.”

The headmaster held up the enrollment form she had picked up at some point.

“Welcome, Mary Sue. The world hopes you will live up to your name.”

Character Page

Mary Sue

Year: Spell Division Year 3

Spell Type: Unknown

Affiliation: Spell Division

Combat Frame: Executioner-style

Servant: Macabre (Grim Reaper)

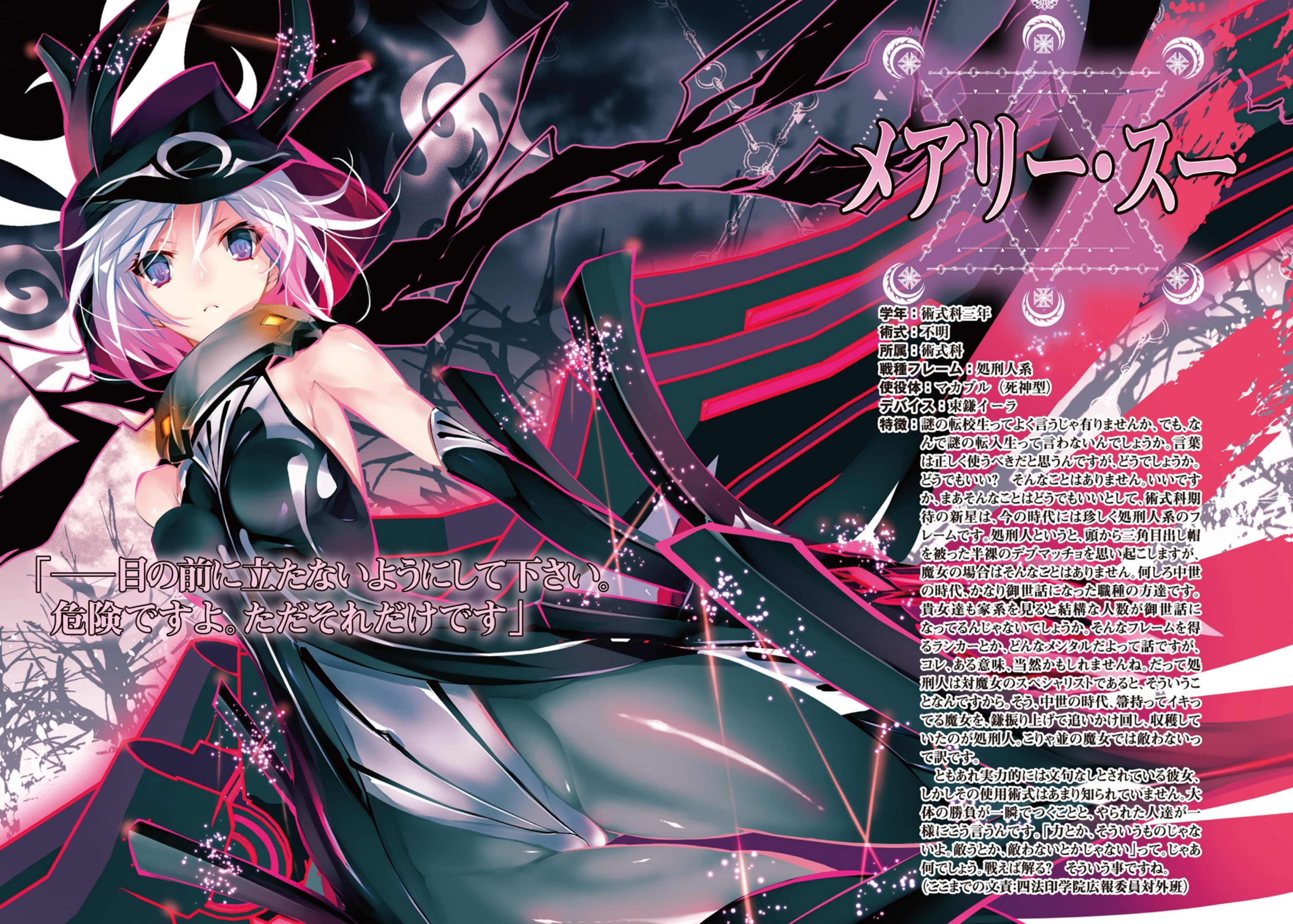
Device: Bundled Scythe Ira

Traits: You often hear about the mysterious transfer student, but not so much about just a mysterious new student. I think we should try to be as accurate as possible with our terminology. That doesn't matter? Of course it does. Well, even if that doesn't matter, this new promising star of the Spell Division uses an Executioner-style Frame which is quite rare these days. The term executioner might make you think of that half-naked fat machoman in a triangular hood with eyeholes, but that isn't the case with witches. After all, in the medieval days, we were on the receiving end of their services a fair bit. If you look into the history of your families, you might find quite a few that were. You might wonder what kind of mentality would lead a Ranker to use that kind of Frame, but in a way, it's kind of obvious. After all, executioners are anti-witch specialists. Yes, in the medieval days, it was the executioners who ran after the broom-riding witches and reaped them with their scythes. Your average witch just can't stand up to that.

Anyway, no one has any complaints about her skill, but not much is known about the spells she uses. Most of her matches are over in an instant and the witches she defeats all say it isn’t about power and that she isn’t someone you can even think of standing up to. So what is all that about? Apparently you have to fight her to find out.

(The previous text came from the external affairs team of Shihouin Academy’s PR Committee.)

“Please do not stand in front of me. It is dangerous. That is all.”



メアリー・スー

「──目の前に立たないようにして下さい。
危険ですよ。ただそれだけです」

学年：術式科三年
術式：不明
所属：術式科
戦種フレーム：処刑人系
使役体：マカブル（死神型）
デバイス：束鎌イーラ
特徴：謎の転校生ってよく言うじゃ有りませんか、でも、なんで謎の転入生って言わないんでしょうか。言葉は正しく使うべきだと思うんですが、どうでしょうか。どうでもいい？　そんなことはありません。いいですか、まあそんなことはどうでもいいとして、術式科期待の新星は、今の時代には珍しく処刑人系のフレームです。処刑人というと、頭から三角目出し帽を被った半裸のデブマッチョを思い起こしますが、魔女の場合はそんなことはありません。何しろ中世の時代、かなり御世話になった職種の方達です。貴女達も家系を見ると結構な人数が御世話になってるんじゃないでしょうか。そんなフレームを得るランカーとか、どんなメンタルだよって話ですが、コレ、ある意味、当然かもしれませんね。だって処刑人は対魔女のスペシャリストであると、そういうことなんですから。そう、中世の時代、箒持ってイキってる魔女を、鎌振り上げて追いかけ回し、収穫していたのが処刑人。こりゃ並の魔女では敵わないって訳です。

　ともあれ実力的には文句なしとされている彼女、しかしその使用術式はあまり知られていません。大体の勝負が一瞬でつくことと、やられた人達が一様にこう言うんです。「力とか、そういうものじゃないよ。敵うとか、敵わないとかじゃない」って。じゃあ何でしょう。戦えば解る？　そういう事ですね。

（ここまでの文責：四法印学院広報委員対外班）

Bull's eye! That's all I have to do!

「必中！
それのみですのよ!?」

「流石です
御嬢様……!」
Well done, milady!

Uniform Page

Shihouin Academy Special Equipment Division Uniform

About the Special Equipment Division

Location: To the left from the main entrance

School Building: Has a spell reactor

Special Traits: Lots of sleepless nights

Origin: The uniform portion of the Special Equipment Division's uniform is the same as the General Division. The real difference is after they transform! That said, the scarf is yellow. I guess I just lied. I'm such a bad teacher. Anyway, if you're wondering what's different, it's the attached coat. It looks like a cape and it has plenty of pockets to stick tools and snacks in. Add on the waist pouch and the uniform has quite a lot of storage space. That's partially because the Special Equipment Division is based on what other countries call the Alchemy Division. The cape look is handed down from the ancient alchemists. The waist pouch used to be a round sack and a relic of old traditions can be seen in the jinx about putting their completed items inside that pouch.

The Special Equipment Division witches love metal, armor, shells, and swords and they even refine their own materials. Yes, it's not common for the older witches of the international police to come by to investigate when the international price of gold starts to fall. Using alchemy to make money is banned, okay? I used to do it a lot, but now that I’m a teacher, I’m telling you not to do it. I mean, if the market crashes, all the gold I have stockpiled from back then will be worthless.

*We asked Special Equipment Division Representative Elsie Hunter to model the uniform.

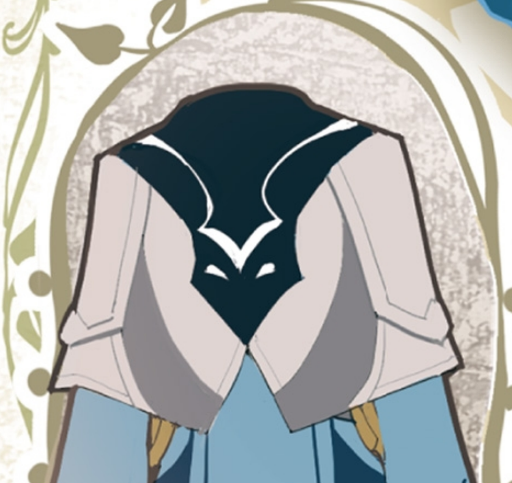
*It went unused in this case, but chest-accentuating stitching is available equally to all.

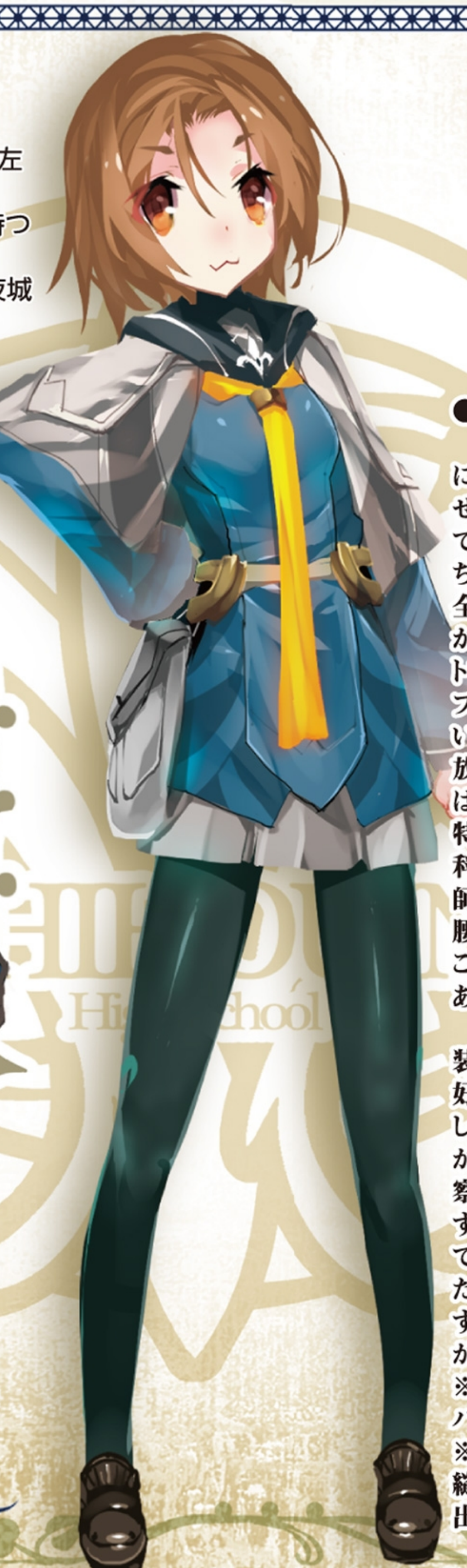
Special Equipment Division

四法印学院特機科制服

特機科について

位置	正門から入って左
校舎	術式反応炉を持つ
特徴	徹夜の多い不夜城


-rear-



●由来

特機科の制服は、その制服部分においては普通科と変わりがありません。要はガワですよガワ！　といってもスカーフが黄色いですね。先生ちょっと嘘をつきました。しかしまあ、全体的に見て、だったら何が違うのかというと、これはもう、アタッチメントで装着される上着部分です。ケープ型のそれは、各種にポケットがついていて工具やら間食やらツッコミ放題。腰のポーチも合わせると収納は結構な量になります。というのも、特機科の元々は各国でいう錬金科。このケープ姿は古来の錬金術師にならったものなんですね。昔は腰のポーチが丸袋で、その名残か、ここには成果物を入れるジンクスがあるようです。

そんな特機科の魔女達は金属や装甲や砲弾、刀剣といったものが大好きで、マテリアルも自分達で精製します。ええ、国際的な金相場が下がり始めたら先輩魔女達の国際警察が調査に来るのもよくあることです。換金目的で錬金やるのは禁止ですからね？　先生も昔よくやりましたけど、皆さんにはするなと言います。相場が崩れたら昔貯め込んだのが損になるじゃないですか。

※モデルは特機科代表エルシー・ハンターさんに御願いいたしました。

※今回は未使用ですが、胸部立体縫製はいつでも誰でも平等に使用出来ます。

特機科

Prologue

“So as to Never Forget This Summer”

The world is connected through summer

For witches, the summer meant either the beach or the mountains.

Shihouin Academy was in the center of Tokyo Bay, so they were constantly surrounded by the ocean. That might make it sound like summer meant the beach for witches, but witches had their origin in Europe and their culture mostly blossomed in the mountains.

“After saying that much, I have to wonder. Is the history here the same as in my home world? Or did some weird magic girl pop in from an alternate wonderland to create the witch culture here? Or maybe witches came from Utsunomiya, the farthest north land my sister was familiar with.”

A white-haired girl held a spell circle labeled “Lecturer: Kagami Kagami”. She wore a two-piece swimsuit that resembled a sleeveless-style outfit and she faced forward without a drop of sweat on her.

West of the beach was a small island with a lighthouse connected to the embankment with a bridge.

In front of her, someone opened a spell circle in a beach chair shaded by a tarp.

“Horinouchi, Hunter. To be honest, I am very interested in this world, but…”

“Just to be clear, witch culture has its origins in a certain nomadic people’s Greek-based nature worshipping beliefs that mixed with Middle Eastern culture in Eastern Europe and then spread throughout Europe.”

Horinouchi wore a vermilion waterproof shirt over a similarly colored swimsuit and she had a few spell circles opened. Kagami frowned at what she said.

“Didn’t the Black Witch create this world?”

“Eh?”

Hunter, who sat next to Horinouchi, lowered her head and slowly raised her right hand, but Kagami ignored her. The lecturer placed a hand on her chin.

“If the Black Witch created this world, then why does witch culture not have its origins in her?”

“Well…after creating this world, she left the world alone for a while…”

“She must have had trouble putting this world together and went off to write some other story. That’s one of my sister’s bad habits.”

“By the way, there’s no proof for what Horinouchi said. In the middle ages, people started wondering why things were the way they were, the dark sages made some guesses, made guesses on top of those guesses, and ended up coming to that conclusion.”

“Sounds like the arguments for the existence of god.”

“I know,” replied Hunter. “To be blunt, you’d probably start a religious war if you start questioning that at school. There are some witch factions that were created from that debate, after all.”

"Yes, the witches with their origins in the middle ages are an incredibly massive group," said Horinouchi.

"For example?"

"The Teutonic Order Eastern Branch Attack Force which is made up of knight-type witches like you, Kagami. There are also a few aerial knight-types in the Rankers, but their armor is really solid. I think that was the first time I used my Magino version on the witch herself. It was so refreshing to know I could fire at a person."

"I know what you mean," agreed Horinouchi. "My techniques are derived from the Hussite Sisters Gunner Force and I remember shooting so many times. I remember dedicating three thousand shots below the temple's eaves, but after firing my secondary cannons until their Magino was destroyed, I realized I could have just used my main cannon. Then I noticed the witch herself was still there, so I finished it off with a blast from my main cannon. You mustn't hold back after all."

"Neither of you think about what people say about you, do you?" commented Kagami.

Hunter raised her hand.

"Where is Utsunomiya?"

"A fair bit north of here. It is a land of gyoza worship. I hear they have built a holy gyoza that many people worship every morning, so I assume there are gyoza witches there."

"Just so you know, Utsunomiya was hit during Hexennacht ten years ago, so it's still being reconstructed."

“Curse my sister! She did always narrow-mindedly insist Yokohama had the best gyoza!”

“In that case, is Yokohama guaranteed to be safe?”

“No, she was left half in tears there when she was served a frog at a legit Chinese restaurant, so you must not let your guard down.”

“The world was half-destroyed a decade ago over things like that?”

“Well, there would be more to it than that,” said Kagami.

Horinouchi tilted her head.

“You said there were a lot of Kantou prefectures your sister didn’t visit much, right?”

“Yes. She said something about not reaching Saitama because Harajuku acted as a breakwater, but getting there from our end of things was also difficult.”

“But the large concert hall in Oomiya was unharmed.”

“Oh, even as sickly as she was, she did go there once to see a live performance from a voice actor she liked.”

“W-wait! You mean she was mixing business and pleasure!?” Horinouchi opened a spell circle. “Call your sister and have her end this violence! Do you know her number!?”

“Look, Hunter. Manko is asking the impossible.”

“I feel like the world would have trouble accepting it if that solved everything…”

“Anyway,” said Kagami. “I see. It was a bit of a mystery, but this is probably a world my sister prepared in advance to write about later. And it has a lot of overlap with reality.”

“Reality? You mean your home? Does that overlap mean something?”

“It makes it easier to write. In other words, she could write a story there at any time. That is why she put it off until later and constructed more original worlds first. It is a common pattern once an author grows accustomed to writing. But she must have gotten tired of creating all those stories to destroy…”

“So she arrived at this older place?”

“The Black Witch created this world, but the moment of the Black Witch’s ‘return’ would be when its history was made and the world began to move. Don’t you think?”

“How are we supposed to confirm that as residents of this world?”

“Once it began to move, the past was set in place. This world and what you see here, including the past, truly exist now. If there are any holes, they will be inspected and filled.” Kagami closed her spell circle. “If I had time, I would have liked to travel overseas, but I think I can grasp the situation in the West using what Hunter can tell me. For the domestic situation, I can have you lecture me, Horinouchi.”

“Can’t you get by with newspapers and the news?”

“But you always grow angry when I ask ignorant questions.”

“…So you’re studying in order to please me?”

“Then you will help me out there?”

At that point, Hunter cut in while glaring at them.

“Wait. Am I being dragged into this?”

“The history of witches is a real pain, especially when focusing on the world at large,” said Horinouchi.

“Ugh,” groaned Hunter just as someone approached the tarp’s shade from the beach side.

The Horinouchi maid in glasses bowed.

“Milady, the targets have been set up out at sea. There are fifty of the auto-loading variety, so you may begin target practice at any time.”

“Understood. We’ll use them right away. And once we’re done…”

Horinouchi stood up and turned around. There was another tarp set up on the beach and more maids and suit-wearing Koutarou were operating grills below it.

“You there! That fire is too weak! You’re supposed to add in as much of a boost as you can for a roaring flame! What if it burns? If it’s a little burnt, it makes for a nice summer memory! This isn’t our kitchen! You there, that bell pepper is burning! Why would you let it burn!? Isn’t that an insult to the person who raised it from a seed!? And that person was me! Eh!? You’re a Mother Earth-type witch, so I need to apologize to the earth!? Do you hate me that much!? I’m the head butler, you know!?”

“Horinouchi, Koutarou is being unreasonable.”

“He always is.”

“The maids get a little bit of relief with their skirts, but is he okay in that suit?”

“Well…” Horinouchi opened a sun-blocking spell over her head like a parasol and left their tarp. “Either way, let’s get to our training. …The foothold spell is in place. We’ll each supply our own magnification. The targets can move, so how do you want them?”

“I see,” said Kagami with a nod.

She had grown fairly accustomed to her Device, but there was still a lot about it she did not understand.

“If the targets are moving, how far will the shots fly if I miss?”

She summoned Dikaiosyne into her hand and Dikaio the dragon servant appeared on her shoulder.

…Heh heh heh. It’s summer, but that blue color makes me think of cider. He’s so cute.

At any rate, she aimed out to sea and fired with her right hand. She had only summoned it to fire, so the Device immediately shattered into ether.

“I’ve seen it a few times now, but it’s strange how yours breaks once you’re done with it.”

“Is that not how it works?”

“Normally it stays around for a bit because your willpower hasn’t gone away.”

One of the maids suddenly looked up.

“Ah.”

She seemed to have notices something, so another maid placing meat on the rib rack also looked up into the sky. A bird of prey was flying through the blue sky, but when she looked toward it…

“Lady Kagami’s shot is about to hit!”

“Eh!?”

Hunter was taken aback. She opened a spell circle and tapped it twice.

“All ships, defend!!”

“Wh-what is this about?”

The first witch to notice held her hand out toward the ocean.

“Milady, on the count of three. Three, two, one…”

Something like a white wall rose from the sea. The maid who had synchronized with the flying bird whistled.

“Lady Kagami, your shot landed two kilometers away, past the American fleet beyond the horizon!”

“Hm. So I missed it?”

“Don’t try to hit it! And don’t shoot at things hidden beyond the earth’s curve!”

“That was nearly an international incident,” commented Horinouchi.

“But it wasn’t! It was just decided it wasn’t!”

“Calm down,” said Kagami. “Don’t you understand, Hunter?”

“I won’t get mad, so just tell me.”

She had permission, so she told her.

“To be blunt, I do not really know what my Device can do.”

“Ohh… So you haven’t taken any readings on its performance?”

“She’s swinging it around like she knows what she’s doing, but it’s really a wild Device without any kind of readings taken or testing done. She’s only authorized as a witch because her servant was registered.”

“In other words, I am a deadbeat living off of Dikaio here? … Well done, you!”

The dragon child withdrew a little but then blushed at the compliment. When Kagami saw the dragon shaking its head and unsure what to do, she looked back and saw the Suzaku on Horinouchi’s shoulder.

The Suzaku seemed to stick its tongue out at them, so was it really a bird? Horinouchi must have known it was being rude because she slapped the top of its head.

“Sorry about that. Suzaku is just really shy.”

“Japan sure has a strange culture concerning small animals,” said Hunter as she watched Dikaiosyne’s scattering ether light.

“That seems like a real shame, but does it mean the school still sees you as a stray witch?”

“Wild, ain’t I?”

“They’re leaving her alone, but only because they think they can use her yet interfering probably wouldn’t end well.”

As Horinouchi spoke, Hunter opened a few spell circles.

“If American-style is fine, I can run some tests for you.”

“Won’t that mean the information will be sent straight to the American military?”

“It’s shared through U.A.H. anyway, right? And taking specialized readings is our specialty. It’s kind of fun, so how about you do it too, Horinouchi?”

“M-me too?”

“I see.” Kagami smiled a little. “This is because the American military will be providing us backup too, isn’t it?”

“We’re just taking some readings is all. …But I do wonder. You wouldn’t be able to use the swing-by, but I think you could get some GPS help through me. Oh, but only when I’m awake.”

“W-wait,” cut in Horinouchi. “You’ll need to negotiate with Japan if you’re including me in that…”

“When it comes to Black Witch countermeasures, on-site decisions are more important than international negotiations.”

Hunter said that with a look of exasperation and Kagami could only smile bitterly.

"Horinouchi is a Japanese spell attack soldier and I take it Hunter would be the American equivalent. I assume your positions are determined using the Ranker system in order to sidestep a lot of those difficulties, but what role does international law play into your interactions beyond that?"

"In Japan, the Imperial Household Agency tends to take the leading role."

"And who is the representative of the Imperial Household Agency?"

"The main representative is the imperial family. Then me. Although I only hold the position in order to take part in the Ranker battles, so the leaders of the Horinouchi family do all the actual work. The headmaster was invited in as a special advisor. Another of the Three Sages was also invited and they're the U.A.H. representative."

The older of the maids bowed Horinouchi's way.

"I see. So you have most of the connections in place. But in that case…"

"Yes." Horinouchi gave a look of resignation. "U.A.H.'s foreign issues are handled by the Three Sages."

"I act as a middleman there."

Koutarou raised a hand while holding tongs, but it almost seemed like he would be in danger if he did not emphasize his contribution.

But in that case, Kagami only needed to open a spell circle and make a call.

“Lady Headmaster, Horinouchi and I would like to establish a military relationship with Hunter. Do we have your permission?”

“Oh, my! It isn’t often that Miss Horinouchi is so open about these things! You have permission.”

“Kagamiiiii!! A-and you too, headmaster!?”

“Horinouchi, you need to focus on the end result more than how we got there.”

Everyone glared at Koutarou who was currently focused on the end result of all the flames.

Horinouchi did not like Kagami’s choice, but it was too late now.

Also…

“You’ve said a lot about me, but it isn’t like I don’t have any friends, you know?”

“Horinouchi, you don’t need to force yourself…”

“I-I am not. Everyone in my class is a witch and we all have special powers, so it isn’t like I stand out or anything.”

“Ohh,” said Hunter. “Through elementary school, schools are generally coed. But the gap between the spells girls and boys can use grows more obvious as the years pass, so it can be tough.”

Girl’s spells were active and boy’s spells were passive.

For a girl, their budding abilities appeared as power, so they would go nuts when they first started learning spells but would soon calm down. That was due to the fear they gained of their own power. There were some groups or individuals that decided to almost entirely seal away their power as a witch.

But boys had passive spells which gave them constant physical abilities that began as a sturdy body. That meant the boys looked stronger during everyday life and the elementary school boys had a tendency to move out ahead.

“Yeah. On parents’ day, someone’s mother laughed and told her husband he used to be like that too, but that made it clear that the power balance had reversed since then.”

“Horinouchi, are you saying that does not occur between girls?”

“Yes, I am. Active witches don’t need to hold back around each other.”

“Who has the most destructive power in the General Division?”

“I am at the top.”

“What about accuracy?”

“That too is m-me.”

“And speed?”

“S-Suzaku is quite fast.”

“I bet you’re the only one that thinks you’re friends with anyone,” said Hunter. “Do they all speak to you really politely?”

Horinouchi had been beaten. She also saw Hunter whispering something to Kagami.

“She’s at the top of the General Division because she’s beaten the rest of them down that far.”

“What about you, Hunter?”

“We do a lot of joint development, so we started out using a group system.”

“I see.” Kagami and Hunter looked back toward Horinouchi. “Horinouchi, I think you should avoid shooting people so much.”

“H-hold it! Don’t treat me like I’m some dangerous person!”

After saying that, she realized something, so she clapped her hands together and pointed out the delightful fact.

“The armor! It would be faster to list the people worse than my Akerindou when it comes to armor! Well, I guess everyone has their flaws. This means I’m perfectly normal. Heh heh heh.”

“Then the weak armor would be the small flaw that makes her adorable,” said Hunter.

“What does that make her power, speed, and accuracy?”

“Failings as a human being?”

“A-again! Don’t link my abilities to my personality!”

The maid managing the targets out at sea silently drank some water while thinking Horinouchi was in trouble.

Hunter found the beach surprisingly nostalgic.

Her father had died partway through elementary school, but there had been so many extra rooms on the American base that she had continued living in their house with a housekeeper coming by every so often. She had been worried about safety, but the base's witches had patrolled the area and they had been worried about the children who had been orphaned or lost a parent like she had. They had often asked "Trick or treat!?" from the sky. If she had needed laundry or cleaning done, she had asked for a "trick". If she had been low on food, she had only needed to ask for a "treat".

It was the beginning of her second year in middle school that she had finally managed to accept that her father was not coming back. She had always been powerful, but that was when her abilities had really jumped up.

…A witch's secondary sex characteristics are a real pain.

She had been a physical-style witch until then, so she had assumed she would develop in a more elegant direction once she grew up. However, she had only grown more physical. Maybe it was due to eating all that meat.

Her rank on the base had risen rapidly, so the military had started experimentally supporting her Magino Frame. After that, her rank in America had started climbing.

All the while, her surroundings had been quite lively.

But it was true there had been a period when there had not been many people around her.

It had only been the witches who would descend from the sky to ask her the same question or the few students still in the elementary and middle schools. Her father was not here and her surroundings had grown a lot busier since then, but…

“Eating lunch with two or three acquaintances, hm? This takes me back.”

“The Special Equipment Division never sleeps, does it?”

“Neither did the base. Or the ships.”

She knew her current surroundings were important, but she still remembered that short period after losing so much. Those who had remained had avoided saying so, but…

…I don’t know if you call those things important, something you don’t want to lose, or whatever else.

She knew how fragile a normal life that allowed for abnormal socialization was.

She wondered if these two knew, but that was a different issue. Given Kagami’s history, she had likely had a harder time than Hunter. Maybe.

So instead of spreading her own idiocy…

“Okay, how about we get started?”

She summoned her own Device, but…

“Let’s go without the Form. Not because it would be too hot, but to make sure you can make that kind of adjustment.”

Summoning just the Device was easy for Kagami.

With her craft-style and her unique ability in this world, she could directly manipulate ether.

She only needed the necessary amount of ether and she always produced the Device weapon and Form armor separately.
But…

“The witches of this world construct the engines when summoning, but that is because it is easier to construct the Device and Form using the power of those engines, right? Or rather, it has been optimized in that way.”

“Right. So summoning just the Device or just the Form is pretty wasteful. But at our level…”

As Hunter explained, Horinouchi summoned Akerindou.

However…

“That was pretty slow, Horinouchi.”

“You’re balancing the engines too cleanly,” said Hunter. “Can’t you be a little rougher than that?”

Horinouchi shook her head.

“It isn’t easy stabilizing the engines with the armor this light.”

“Due to that extra weight you have there?”

“This girl…” Horinouchi glared at Kagami. “When sending the ether in to power it, it can end up floating away if the ether density is too low.”

“Oh, that doesn’t affect me and Kagami’s is pretty heavy as a Holy Knight.”

“Right. Hunter, you do a good job creating the acceleration system and you use that swing-by method. But Kagami, it’s a mystery how you can keep up with me using such a heavy Device.”

“Tell me to come with you and I will follow you wherever you might go. …Hello, I am Kagami Kagami and I am currently right behind you.”

“Are you forgetting the part where you were standing in front of my house?”

“I couldn’t have you running away, could I?”

Kagami rested Dikaiosyne on her right shoulder.

“Anyway, where is the target?”

“Out at sea. …Um, on Hunter’s instructions, it’s four kilometers out.”

“I see.”

That number made sense to Kagami, but Horinouchi tilted her head.

“But why that far away? The U.A.H. standard is a kilometer and a half.”

"That standard is probably set to the bare minimum so the male members can use it for target practice with their guns. Now…"

Hunter raised the corner of her mouth to press Kagami to answer, so she did so.

"Hunter's four kilometers is to correct for the curvature of the earth, isn't it?"

Kagami explained her reasoning.

"Since the earth is round, the greater the distance between you and your enemy, the more they disappear behind the curve."

"Kagami… You don't need to sink down below my breasts while gesturing, 'Like this. Like this, see?'."

"My apologies! I thought that would make it easier for you to understand. …It is hard to picture when you are used to firing your Normal Device from visible range or firing your Magino Frame at extreme high altitude, but outside those two circumstances, the earth itself becomes an obstacle. Take Hunter from the other day for example."

"When I can monitor my opponent with the satellites, I can fire at them without worrying about them firing back." Hunter smiled and pointed out to sea. "From a visual height of a meter and a half, you can see a little over four kilometers away. The Form's heels raise your visual height to about two meters and that lets you see to a little over five kilometers away, but we're going Formless right now."

"Well, we can do that conversion in our head. …In other words, that distance is America U.A.H.F.'s estimated limit of our effective visual range?"

"Right. If we can respond to anything at that range, then the challenge for a close-range fighter is how to fill that five kilometer gap. …That's the absolute distance according to the US."

"I see. And that is why you use that swing-by for so much speed."

"No other organization can use surveillance satellites or anything equivalent, so that is a troublesome ability."

"You two are the crazy ones for beating me."

Hunter glared at them, so Kagami had to wonder if that was true.

But…

"Looking at it now, four kilometers is a surprisingly long distance."

"You can only see the top half of the target, right?"

Once Hunter mentioned it, Kagami realized it was even worse than that.

"There are waves out at sea, so it is rising and falling a good bit."

"Lady Kagami, shall we stop the waves for you!?"

"Koutarou, limit your overprotectiveness to Horinouchi."

"The amplitude is actually easier to read out at sea, right?" said Hunter. "Oh, and shoot without holding it."

"Without holding it?"

"Yeah."

Hunter nodded and removed her Device from her arm.

…It is not falling?

"The acceleration system uses a flight spell divine protection, so it can fly through the sky just by existing. Your Device should be the same since you based it on Horinouchi's. The rest is simple. You control it like it's the Magino instead of the Normal."

Hunter gently swung both hands and the Device rose into the air.

Horinouchi did the same and hers looked more stable. Then it was Kagami's turn.

"Like this?"

When she tried, it rose a little too far, so she lowered it as if holding down someone's head.

"The front of yours is light," said Hunter, so that must have been the case.

Then Hunter's explanation continued.

"When firing, you can see from the front of the cannon using the firing spell circle. Just think of it as using the Magino Device's targeting spell while still in Normal mode. Horinouchi, you fire yours with a bow-style, so you target with visual magnification, right? That feels more accurate, but when you have your feet on the ground, it's best to have your point of view as high as possible. So at times like this, raise it up a little."

"I see," said Kagami. "It is true the targeting is matched to the front of the cannon when firing the Magino Device."

"I'm sure Horinouchi is already doing it, but you should set it so you can see all the important points of your Device when in Magino mode. You couldn't react when I jumped onto yours, remember? You would have seen me if you were monitoring it from a little higher up."

"Akerindou also has viewpoints pointing outwards, but it doesn't have any looking back toward itself."

"So go like this."

Hunter opened spell circles around herself.

They surrounded her like a forward-facing spindle.

"It won't cover all 360 degrees, but it leaves no blind spots above, below, left, right, in front, or behind."

"You create additional viewpoints in Normal mode too? For more than targeting?"

"In close-quarters combat, having a rearview mirror and side mirrors is pretty convenient. Turning your head just to see where your opponent is can mess up your stance."

"I see," said Kagami for the umpteenth time that day.

...This is a very interesting world.

The weapons were more than just weapons. They included combat support devices. Also, all the functionality of a battleship had been gathered together and placed inside a handheld weapon.

“So these are more than mere weapons that provide destructive power and mobility. They are also physical and sensory support devices.”

“Most of the focus is on sensory support. Some witches will even use their servant or a detachable drone. Also…”

“W-wait a minute,” said Horinouchi while displaying a diagram of Akerindou. “I know this is supposed to be a training camp, but aren’t you going over a little too much material at once?”

“Horinouchi, are you worried for me?” asked Kagami.

“No, Horinouchi’s frame is just really detailed, so even a small change has to be a big deal. Let’s go over each of the parts and see what possibilities we can find.”

That also seemed like too much at this point, but Kagami decided to allow it.

Koutarou was on edge.

The maids were as well.

They were watching Horinouchi, Kagami, and Hunter standing on the beach with their Normal Device floating in the air, but…

“——————”

Every time the three made a move, Koutarou and the maids prepared to applaud.

“…”

But when they saw the girls open another spell circle and begin a lecture on Frames, they stopped moving. It was most noticeable in the young maids, but they all had a dangerous level of tension in their shoulders. When Hunter pointed out to sea and the three girls simultaneously opened spell circles, everyone prepared to applaud once more.

“Well-…!”

One of the young maids nearly jumped the gun on her “Well done, milady!”, so one of the older maids teleported over and chopped the back of her neck to knock her out.

The witch managing the sea targets stood a little back and to the right of the girls, but she looked back and gave the hand signal for “safe”.

Everyone sighed.

“That was a close one.”

“The younger ones view Lady Mitsuru like a little sister.”

Hunter must have heard the maid collapsing from the chop to the neck because she turned around.

“Something the matter?”

“Yes, a maid was so focused on grilling the meat she came down with heatstroke!”

"Heh heh. It really has been a long time since we've done anything like this outside," said Horinouchi.

Everyone smiled back as if to say, "Indeed it has." When Horinouchi looked back out to sea, one of the maids spoke up.

"The heatstroke may have been a lie, but doesn't Lady Mitsuru's nostalgic reaction seem a little too cool for something as serious as heatstroke?"

"It has been a long time, so she merely spoke the truth. I think she simply trusts in our nursing ability."

"True."

They looked back to the collapsed maid being carried below the tarp. A maid skilled in freezing spells was waiting with a bucket made of frozen beach sand that was being used to hold the meat and other perishables. She let out a white breath and spoke.

"If we shove her in this, it should look like we're doing something."

"Yes, convincing Lady Mitsuru matters more than actually nursing anyone back to health."

"I need to make sure I never come down with heatstroke…"

Witches are scary, thought Koutarou, but the three girls still had not fired. Once again, their spell circles suddenly vanished.

"——————"

Just as everyone prepared to clap, Horinouchi slammed her fist into Kagami.

The maids tilted their heads with sweat dripping from their chins.

“What was that?”

“You couldn’t tell?” asked Koutarou. “Lady Kagami called her Manko.”

All of the maids gave him a look of scorn. Finally, the Head Maid smiled his way and placed a hand by her ear.

“Oh? What was that, Head Butler? Would you mind telling us what you said?”

“Either speak politely or interrogate me, but don’t try to do both!”

“Just so you know, I was the witch in charge of *that latter job* back in the former West Germany.”

Koutarou had heard before that she had lost badly to Horinouchi’s mother.

…She may be older than me, but my position is higher! I outrank her!

But then the maid grilling meat three grills over turned toward them.

“Head Maid, Head Butler, may I make a bold request?”

“What is it?’

“Can we do our work in swimsuits like Lady Mitsuru and the others?”

"Oh?" The Head Maid smiled a little. "The Head Butler is working in his suit, so as his subordinates, we couldn't possibly do that. Isn't that right, Head Butler?"

He had a feeling the look in her eyes was saying, "I accidentally only brought a really skimpy swimsuit today, so if you agree to that request, I'll pull your teeth out", so he decided to nod.

"Oh."

Then three cannon blasts rang from the beach. Everyone immediately spoke up without checking on the results.

"Well done, milady!!"

Horinouchi realized something just as they fired.

It was concerning Kagami next to her.

"Kagami, do you have any blast protection?"

That was a divine protection generally included in the Form, but at the Ranker level, attacks produced great pressure. Devices were required to have externally-directed divine protections to keep the blast from damaging the people and objects around them. They could only fire their Devices without the Form because they were protected by those externally-directed divine protections.

…But did Kagami's Dikai-whatever have that?

She had been firing blanks at first, but she had only fired it with her Form since remaking it.

Curious, Horinouchi looked over and saw Hunter looking back from the other direction.

Kagami was missing. *I knew it,* thought Horinouchi as she looked back.

“That was rather exciting.”

Kagami’s voice came from several dozen meters back. Sword in hand, she stood on top of the tarp covering Koutarou and the others. She fixed the swimsuit that had been shifted out of place by the blast, peered down below, bowed toward the maids, and jumped down.

“I still cannot tell where this Device is more flexible and where it is not.”

“Yeah, it’s a weapon, but individuals tend to make a lot of adjustments to theirs.”

As soon as she landed on the beach, Kagami pointed her large sword toward the other two girls.

“Toh.”

Then she flew forward with the sword held below her arm.

She did not run or jump. She literally flew.

“Did you put a thruster in your sword!?”

Kagami’s sword had not had its own acceleration system.

“By linking the blasts together, I can use the power of the blanks to fly. It is only a short jump, but I probably could truly fly if I used an acceleration spell instead.”

"That will seal off your mobility when you're firing, so be careful."

By the time Horinouchi nodded in agreement with Hunter, Kagami had landed next to them. She placed a hand on her chin in thought.

"With my method of direct creation, I actually have to remake Dikaiosyne from the ground up every single time. Even if I try to add in those divine protections, I will not be able to remember them all."

"Oh… That's right. We just place the designs in the spell circle console, so the parts and divine protections are added in as we control the ether. In other words, once the designs are made, we only have to control the fuel used to construct it."

But Kagami's craft-style did not require any fuel control and it had no concept of premade designs, so she had to rely on her memories and instincts to build it up from scratch.

"Kagami… You don't care much for details, do you?"

Directly manipulating ether to construct objects without a ceremony was pretty much the work of a god. But…

"Not even a god can create a fighter jet without designs. I would not be able to construct my Device without the knowledge of power systems and firing systems I gained from my experiences in the previous worlds I traveled through. I can increase the armor or power, but I am currently lacking when it comes to detailed divine protections or control systems."

“That would explain why you were shooting so wildly…” said Horinouchi.

“I’m starting to feel like I shouldn’t have gotten so serious about fighting you…” said Hunter.

They had both lost to her, so they both understood what it was like. But…

“What do you do when you need a divine protection, Kagami?”

“In fact, do you have some notes listing what you need to put in that big sword?”

“I have confidence in my memory. But anyway…”

She swung her sword and ether light scattered.

…She’s remaking it, isn’t she?

Being able to do that instantly was a major strength of the craft-style.

She swung the sword a few more times.

“There. …No designs and no ceremony. If instantaneous construction is my way, then I only have to remake Dikaiosyne to suit my current needs. Dikaiosyne is a simple weapon. It only has the sword, the cannon, the armor, and the acceleration system. So in battle, I can add on the necessary components in stages.”

She seemed to be speaking to herself more than anyone and then she fired diagonally up into the sky.

“On top of that, maybe I should make recipes for a few different versions. Anti-air, anti-ground, etc.”

The blast rang loudly, but something was different from before.

“That should do it.”

A wind full of ether light dust whipped around her, but she herself was unaffected.

“Did you make it recoilless?”

“Yes, but I also altered the effective range of the armor spells into a net shape that allows the blast to pass through and disperse. I had already done so with the back end of the Magino Device’s cannon, but I decided I should probably do the same with the Normal one as well,” she explained. “And with that, I think we can get down to some proper training.”

“For being high Rankers, we don’t have much of a common understanding on anything.” Hunter smiled bitterly. “I think that means we all still have a lot to teach each other.”

Chapter 1

“Look Into the Sky”

Does passion come from boredom?
Does busyness come from passion?

As the target practice began, the maids heard a noise they were quite familiar with.

Most of them were graduates of Shihouin Academy. Since Hexennacht came once every ten years, the academy had no exact graduation system. Due to the Ranker system, the witches would continue on as Rankers even after completing their studies.

But ten years was a very long time. It may have seemed short in hindsight, but that was only because it was so densely packed. Once their skills had advanced and they gained the talent to match their age, they were able to view themselves more objectively. And…

“We thought we could produce the most powerful witch if we passed on and combined all of our skills,” said the Head Maid.

The eyes behind her glasses were of course directed toward Horinouchi.

But…

“Needless to say, other countries and organizations were thinking the same thing and many of them retired during the past ten years. The promising individuals were worn down and realized the innocent latest generation that took those skills for granted had a better chance at victory, so they cleared the way for that younger generation.”

“Do you think the next Hexennacht will be the decisive one?”

“When faced with the power of Lady Mitsuru’s mother ten years ago, the Black Witch showed her true power for the very first time.”

Meaning…

“She forcibly removed the sealing barrier. We had always assumed she was sealed, but she had simply wanted to avoid dealing with an endless supply of challengers. So when we were close to actually reaching her, she stripped off her bonds and fought back. And as a result…the world was half-destroyed. Well, maybe not that much, but we were taught a serious lesson,” she said. “So there is a possibility the Black Witch will forcibly remove the seal from the very beginning next Hexennacht.”

“What will happen to the Ranker system then? Oh, please turn over that meat.”

“It is not cooked yet. Lady Mitsuru prefers it at least medium. …The Ranker system means nothing to the Black Witch. But we will of course strengthen the seal and the top-ranked witch will be at the center of that. I would guess the other witches will be prepared to intercept a similar disaster to ten years ago.”

“I see. And was there any reason to tell me that?”

“That is something I only want to tell people who have no reason to hear it,” explained the Head Maid. “After all, Lady Mitsuru’s strength has unfortunately yet to reach that of her mother.”

“I am aware of that. But what do you think about all this?”

The Head Butler started to the flip over the meat in front of the Head Maid, but she deflected the tongs.

After a few clashes of metal, she continued speaking.

“I think it is headed in a good direction. …Lady Mitsuru’s mother also had friends.”

“The Three Sages. …I believe you originally served one of them.”

“A lot of time has passed since ten years ago.”

She held the Head Butler’s tongs down with her own.

“We are here in the hope of creating the strongest witch who has inherited everything we had. But even everything we had is not enough. The world is a large place and there are countless countries and organizations. However, those may have arrived here in the ‘present’.”

Listen.

“There is one thing we eventually hope to say: ‘Well done, milady. You have surpassed your mother.’ We see some hope of that here and that is why every last one of the maids sees meaning in this outing. So please do not try to serve her rare meat, Head Butler. …I will burn you.”

The maid in charge of the targets blew a whistle.

There had been enough for a total of fifty shots. Hunter received the hit statistics from her and said “thanks”. The maid smiled, so she may have been a Western witch despite looking Japanese.

At any rate, the data included Horinouchi's and Kagami's, but…

"Hmm. Kagami, hold on."

Hunter had thirty-two clean hits, fifteen partial hits, and three grazes. She had not missed even once.

Horinouchi's results were a little strange. For some reason, forty-seven of them were labeled "Success". Three were partial hits.

…Is this who I was fighting?

She had about a 95% rate of lethal hits and even her fumbles were considered partial hits. That meant she never did not hit.

…She shoots entire volleys like this, so I'm glad I didn't just try to dodge.

If they were definitely going to hit, dodging was a waste of effort. It was better to actively let them hit. She had done that on the spur of the moment the other day, but she was starting to realize that had been the right decision.

Then again, Hunter also fired scatter-shot rounds. By having her shots scatter at a certain distance and then converge again, she could confuse her opponent and also lower the ultimate scattering effect. She had chosen that technique here because she was firing on practice targets, so it was also a tactical victory.

“Y’know, I thought I’d get to see what you were good at or not and how you would handle something like this.”

Kagami’s results were incredible.

“Out of fifty shots, you got twelve clean hits, and twenty-three partial hits. You missed all of the others, but how did that happen?”

“Good question,” added Horinouchi. “Why didn’t you just keep firing without forcing yourself? And how could you miss with that long barrel?”

Kagami brought a hand to her chin and smiled a little.

“Well, the ballistic course did not fall as much as I expected.”

“Fall?”

“Yes. With mysterious weapons like these, that kind of effect is generally enhanced to increase the realism, so I assumed that would be the case here.”

Kagami looked out to sea and tilted her head.

“After trying it out a few ways, I realized the ballistic path is a lot more normal than I would have thought. In fact, it almost seems too smooth. I had not noticed before, though.”

“You mean…?”

“This is the first time I’ve heard someone blame their misses on ‘how the world is made’,” said Horinouchi.

Hunter had to agree, but once she thought about it…

…The path of ether projectiles in immobile ether is generally different from the normal physical laws, so you generally just give up on calculating that out.

That was supposedly because each spell bent the physical laws in a different way.

But Kagami's spell was a primitive one that did not use a ceremony. According to Horinouchi…

"You might be hoping for a pure calculation of an ether projectile's trajectory."

"That's Kagami's 'stray' side coming into play, isn't it?"

It felt like having a god standing next to you, which was more exasperating than strange.

But they had their results. There were certain tendencies to when Horinouchi "missed" and the angles of Hunter's convergence and scattering could use further investigation. So for the time being…

"Well, let's take a quick break. I've got a decent grasp on your Normal Devices now and I'm sure Kagami's running low on fuel."

"Well, yes. Japan is in the middle of summer break at the moment. Our girls are nearly shut-ins, but Miss Mitsuru and the others went to the beach. Ahh, I want a vacation too. Yes, a maid from Mitsuyo's place dropped off the seeds inside a cooler earlier. Koutarou is apparently going to the beach too."

A voice filled the sunny headmaster's office.

The person making light gestures and turning around as she spoke was of course the headmaster.

She narrowed her eyes as she spoke into the communication spell circle.

“I’m sure you’re busy too. I’m betting you thought American Representative Hunter was the better bet, after all.”

She nodded at the response and laughed.

She moved over to the window, sat on the windowsill, and finally sighed. Then she laughed again.

“That’s right. You had never lived anywhere with the ocean so close by. Do you remember Shonan?”

She laughed much harder this time. She held her stomach and wiped the tears from her eyes.

“Yes, we were three women leaving their husbands at home. Mitsuyo really did like visiting different places to show you around.”

After all…

“Mitsuyo apparently didn’t like going out much. Her husband told me. She would at best visit shrines, so he was curious how she could show us around like she knew what she was talking about.”

“————”

An exasperated voice arrived from beyond the transmission.

The headmaster replied while looking to the academy visible outside the window.

“That isn’t possible,” she said. “I too am allowing a flower to bloom. A very important flower that is separate from the reconstruction of the Kantou region. …I do have my pride as one of those involved. Yes…”

She smiled and spoke into the spell circle.

“If you have any thoughts on this, then come meet them, Lisbeth. I, Cerisier Shihouin, may be no replacement for Mitsuyo, but I will show you around.”

Yes.

“I will show you the current cutting-edge and upper limits of witches. Yes, if you’re going to come, do it at the beginning of fall. You’re making some corrections at the American mainland right now, aren’t you? Wait until you’re done with that. I’m sure those girls will be delighted. Those children are honing themselves while training like we once did. The autumn flowers are sure to be quite beautiful by then.”

Autumn is a long way off, thought Horinouchi with a sigh as she used a towel to wipe off the sweat below her sunblock divine protection.

The three of them were drinking some water below a parasol. It was time for lunch to be served and they were all drinking from their water bottles with their servants on their heads, but Kagami suddenly looked over.

The silhouette of Enoshima was visible to the west.

“It looks like Enoshima was not destroyed. How kind of my sister.”

“Is that how it works?”

“Yes.” Kagami formed a smile on her lips. “My sister handled more of the writing. And if you are putting a location you know in a story, would you destroy it or preserve it?”

I’m not sure, thought Horinouchi, but this was not a test and she did not have to worry too much about her answer.

Hunter clasped her hands behind her head and gave her answer.

“Before I knew anything about Hexennacht, I bet I would have destroyed it.”

“You sound sure of yourself.”

“Well, destroying somewhere you’re familiar with has more impact, you know? I bet any beginner writer wants to do that.”

“Are you a writer too, Hunter?” asked Kagami.

“No, I’m not really interested in that,” she said. “But before Hexennacht ten years ago, American movies always had the US nearly destroyed by zombies, a natural disaster, or some evil organization. Until ten years ago, the US was something of a safe zone.”

“In that case,” said Horinouchi.

A sudden thought had occurred to her and she tilted her head while sweeping her gaze from Enoshima to the Atami region.

“Does that make the Black Witch relatively peaceful?”

"Perhaps so," replied Kagami while crossing her arms. "We lived in northern Yokohama, but do you think my sickly sister longed to visit this area?"

"How are we supposed to answer that?"

Only after asking did Horinouchi realize that was meant to be rhetorical.

…What a complicated person.

She had expressed her intent to punish her sister, yet she also expressed an understanding of that sister.

How many days…no, months and years would she have had to pursue her sister to view it like that?

"Kagami."

"Yes?"

"Have you visited your home in this world?"

"Yes…I have. I appeared right in front of it when I arrived here."

"Really?" asked Hunter, looking a little taken aback.

In Kagami's blind spot, Koutarou was gesturing if he should record this, but the Suzaku slowly shook its head on top of Horinouchi's shoulder.

…I guess that means it has a head.

She had a feeling she had seen that several times in the past, but she also had a feeling this was her first time noticing it.

At any rate, Kagami began speaking while staring toward Yokohama in the distance.

"There was a hole there. It all started when I decided to go to the police and ask what had happened."

"You seem rather accustomed to that sort of thing…"

"I'm guessing it was supposedly destroyed ten years ago."

"This is kind of strange," said Hunter. "If you'd come here ten years before, you might have seen the house that might have been there. But if your sister is writing this story as 'ten years afterwards', then…"

"Most likely, this is the only time I could appear in. This world is ruled by the world creation divine protection that my sister and I created, so you cannot move any further back than Page 1."

She sounded like she had personally experienced that a few times. Horinouchi thought she understood but also thought they needed to investigate a few things.

"In that case, when did our world begin?"

"The beginning would be this time period of 'ten years afterwards', but the world born there will fill in the gaps to explain why it and those inside it exist. If it all seems consistent, then either my sister was just that skilled, my guidance was that effective, or…"

Kagami smiled toward Horinouchi and Hunter.

"The people of this world managed to determine their own past apart from the two of us."

"Oh, you mean like how authors will say the characters in a story start doing things on their own?" asked Hunter.

I’m not so sure about that, thought Horinouchi.

Kagami opened her mouth and licked her lips after removing the water bottle’s straw from them.

“I thank you.”

“Once again, I have no idea why you’re thanking me.”

“Yes.” She smiled. “I hope you will eventually understand, Horinouchi. You too, Hunter.”

Horinouchi could only agree with the self-proclaimed god, but then Hunter raised her right hand.

“Um, Horinouchi, can you step out into the sun and wave to the left?”

“What?”

She was confused because the ocean was to the left.

…Is there someone there?

She stepped out from below the parasol and did as she was instructed, but it was more to answer her question than anything.

…Over there?

She tried waving.

“Higher than that.”

“Are they far away?”

She leaned back and more raised her hand than waved.

“————————”

A great roar passed by in the sky to the north.

It was an airplane. It had a somewhat diamond-like silhouette and Koutarou immediately ran out.

“Is that an American U.A.H.F. F-23!?”

Horinouchi was familiar with American fighters because some of her witch work involved the American military.

However, things like fighters generally acted as the rear guard during training. After all, the only time they would be sent out with witches would be Hexennacht.

But one was flying through the sky now.

“You know what that is, Koutarou!?”

“Yes. American U.A.H.F. is probably using it for period observations of the moon from the earth. But its orientation is a little odd.”

Sure enough, the aircraft was flying upside down.

Its wings were shaped like flat isosceles triangles and they had spell emblems on them. Quite a few of what looked like targeting spells were opened on the back end of the aircraft.

“Yeah.” Hunter pointed her right thumb up toward it. “After that last battle, you’ve gotten really popular, Horinouchi. You’re known as the Ginger Shrine Maiden. They said they wanted to take some pictures of you, so they had the moon observer fly by.”

“Was it flying upside down to get pictures of the earth?” asked Kagami.

"No, they take pictures of the moon reflected in the ocean. But they came here since Horinouchi is in a swimsuit. They said something about working hard to get the settings right for some extreme macro photography. The distance they're focusing on is completely different after all."

"Y-you could at least warn me in advance."

"If she had, would you have let them take the photo?"

She could not answer that question. Besides, who *would* let them? But…

"Oh, don't worry. Everyone in our unit is pretty West Coast."

"Okay, men! Out of the 216 shots, we got 12 clean shots of the target!"

"Second Lieutenant! For all the help I gave on the macro photography settings, I request the full size data!"

"Just between us, did you get some thermographic images too!?"

"This is 7th Fleet Detached Force Blue Bloom. Pass over us and we'll fire our anti-air guns at you, so stay away."

"But, commander! We want some eye candy too! …Oh, but that doesn't mean there's anything wrong with you, okay?"

Hunter saw some intense static fill the transmission from her comrades out at sea.

…That XO can be pretty strict…

Meanwhile, the fighter tilted a bit to say goodbye and then made a steep ascent.

“Is there any reason to photograph the moon from within the atmosphere when you have satellites?”

“You saw the Black Witch reach out her hand before, right?”

“I did,” said Horinouchi as she held up her bottle.

A maid brought over a new one.

Hunter’s was swapped out too, but that seemed a waste when she still had plenty left.

…Does that mean I need to drink this one faster so it doesn’t go to waste!?

No, probably not, she thought while continuing where she left off.

“The distance from the moon to the earth’s atmosphere and from the atmosphere to the earth are completely different, right? But her hand seemed to move at the same speed while we were watching.”

“Does the thickness of the arm take that concept into account as well?” asked Kagami.

“Yes, that’s right. Meaning…”

Horinouchi continued for her while tilting her head.

“That arm was an optical illusion?”

“No, not that.”

She did not understand much. In fact, not many inside the American military had seen that phenomenon before.

"It was the same as ten years ago. The 'side effects' of the Black Witch came from the moon, but they moved at extremely high speeds before reaching the earth's atmosphere. And once they entered the atmosphere, they slowed to a speed we can perceive. ...I wonder if that's the world conforming to our reactions."

"I will leave it to you two to decide how much that performance conforms to this world's rules."

"Yeah." Hunter simply nodded. "The Black Witch probably has some control over ether. Just like you, Kagami. Ether runs through the ley lines and controls both time and destiny, so if you could 'ride' that, it might behave in accordance to your wishes. When reaching out her arm, her hand is quickly moved forward until it can clearly be seen as a symbol of fear. Once it's close enough for us to recognize that performance, it slows down to a speed that she can actually control. That would be my guess," she said. "So if we measure the waves of ether coming from the moon both inside and outside the earth's atmosphere, the difference in amplitude can tell us how quickly the Black Witch approaches."

"Well done!" announced Horinouchi.

"To be honest, your family and Shinto as a whole are a lot more impressive when it comes to anything related to ley lines. Maybe that's because we don't really have any big names in nature worship."

"I see," said Kagami while opening a spell circle.

She must have taken a picture of the previous aircraft. It was already starting to leave in the photograph, but…

“So you use the F-23 here?”

“Was it different in your home, Kagami?” asked Horinouchi.

“We used a different model.”

Is that how it works? wondered Hunter.

“I think this one was chosen because of its stealth ability and the fact that divine protection emblems could be evenly arranged on the surface of the wings. The rival model had more acceleration, but all-around defense proved impossible.”

“Curse my sister. That change was clearly targeted right at me!”

“Um, can you stop revealing the petty secrets of our world?”

“Calm down,” said Kagami while holding her palm out toward Horinouchi.

She then looked to Hunter and showed her a spell circle.

“More importantly, look at this.”

The old-fashioned boxy design of spell circle contained a vanishing Phlogiston Heart.

It likely contained the heat from the Device used for training earlier. She had yet to dispose of it, but Hunter was unsure if she should call that careless or just unusual. Regardless, Kagami tilted her head.

“Hunter, you said you have a technique to immediately summon your Magino mode from Normal mode.”

"Yes, it's an American summoning technique."

She more or less knew what Kagami was trying to say.

Summoning her weapon was of utmost importance for a witch, so there were a broad variety of methods and Kagami likely wanted as many options as possible.

But Hunter had to think.

"Hmm. That would be American-style training, so I'm not sure I could get permission."

Horinouchi saw Hunter open a spell circle and make a call.

After a while, she tilted her head a few times, but then she raised her right hand while still looking at the screen like an operator.

"Horinouchi."

"What is it?"

"Can you take off your shirt? Oh, and move as close to the water as you can get."

"Eh? Are they going to take pictures of me from a satellite or a fleet out at sea!?"

She complied as payment for the leaked information.

"Yeahhhhhhhhh! Thank you so much, commander! Thank you so much! Eh? What do you mean we all have to line up on the deck?"

“Yeahhhhhhhhhhhh! Wait, why are all the witches fully equipped? It’s hot outside, you know? There were sharks off of Kanagawa the other day, you know?”

“Yeahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh! Commander! To be blunt, how do you want us to beg for our lives!?”

“What was that last ‘yeah’ for!? Now line up and point your asses this way! …Don’t strip!”

I’m glad they all get along, thought Hunter while listening to the screams coming in over the transmission.

But she had permission.

They moved over to the cooking area. Below the tarp, they started by eating the meat and vegetables that were already prepared. She was surprised to find the meat had a bit of a breading on it. She could not get enough of the flavor when the sauce soaked into the breading and she ate it with the vegetables.

But…

“About what you were saying, it mostly comes down to preparing your willpower in advance.”

She had something to show them, so she grabbed a nearby skewer.

“Like this.”

She stabbed a partially cooked piece of meat onto the tip. The Head Maid working the grill muttered something about that one still being rare, but Hunter knew she just had to finish cooking it later.

Anyway, she continued stabbing meat onto the skewer.

“This is how Horinouchi and the others prepare their ether and willpower. Basically, they gradually build it up.”

“So they gather it on site when they need it, right?”

“Yes,” agreed Horinouchi while looking at Hunter’s hand. “That is why we build in the engines. If we start up the engines first, we can increase our ether extraction even when starting from zero.”

“That’s right.” Hunter held up the skewered meat like a spear. “And once you have this much meat, you transform, right?”

“Yes. Is that wrong?”

“You need to change your way of thinking.”

She handed the skewer to the Head Maid who hated rare meat so the woman could resume cooking it.

Hunter instead grabbed some other meat with a pair of tongs.

“These are spare ribs. They still haven’t been split apart.”

Kagami watched Hunter prepare the meat.

She had actually had her eye on the spare ribs already.

…After all, pork always had a way of showing up in the alternate fantasy worlds.

However, her sister had not known much about the slaughtering side of procuring meat. She always had her doubts about it when she saw it, but since they still managed to procure the meat, she could only assume there was some kind of correction in place.

…Hooray for fantasy. It is even kind to meat.

But in this modern setting, it was a bit of a strange sight.

Human ribs and pig ribs were not all that different. The meat between and around the ribs was generally similar to breast meat, but it was also very soft since it was rarely used. And these were cooked in rows of five or six instead of splitting them apart first.

They were kept in the shape of ribs. There was a natural desire to split them apart when seeing those bones, but there was a reason not to do so.

They were easier to cook like this.

If they were separated, the cook would have to think about how well done each and every one was and the flavor would grow too strong when they were individually soaking in the sauce.

But when all together…

“I was familiar with the idea of a rib rack, but this is my first time seeing one.”

“A rib rack?” asked Horinouchi with a tilt of the head.

Hunter only smiled.

“It’s a standard for barbecue, but the American-style is pretty crude.”

The maids carried it over.

It was structured like bookends made of thin metal rods. It looked something like a toast stand.

“It looks like that thing that holds the tires of bicycles.”

…That is called a bicycle stand, Horinouchi.

But as for the rib rack…

“After covering the spare ribs with sauce, you stick them on here without separating them.”

Hunter applied a thick coating of reddish brown sauce and stuck the meat on the device.

“Should you really be putting that much seasoning on them?” asked Horinouchi.

“They are standing up and the fat will cook out, so most of it will drip down. And it is generally cooked from below with a cover over the top, right?”

“Right. After it’s been cooked just the right amount, the meat gets nice and tender. Anyway, we’ll be leaving it on low heat for about an hour.”

Koutarou carried over some already cooked ribs on a plate with a lid.

“I thought this might happen, so I already prepared some.”

“Makes me question why we’re cooking these other ones, but thanks. Now…”

Hunter held a knife out toward the steaming ribs on the plate.

“This is over a kilogram which makes it three times as much as that skewer of meat. …Oh, and don’t worry about the bones. Anyway, when eating it, the host will cut it up. But…”

Just as Hunter said that, the Head Maid walked over.

“This has finished cooking.”

She placed the skewer of meat next to the ribs Hunter was holding up.

Hunter nodded and then continued.

“The skewered meat is small, so it cooks quickly, right? That’s why you grab them right when they’re done cooking and gradually fill your stomach. But…”

Hunter stuck her knife into the ribs.

Instead of cutting them apart, she lifted them up and took a bite from the end. She clearly tore a piece off, chewed it with her back teeth, and swallowed.

“I’d like a drink! …Thanks. What I’m talking about is eating a giant piece of meat all at once instead of grabbing smaller pieces one at a time.”

Finally, she began separating the ribs. She took the half she had bitten into for herself and then separated the other half, bones included.

“Your way is like sticking a skewer through the cooked meat. My way is like preparing a bunch at once and then cooking it.”

“In other words, you prepare a pool before entering battle?”

"No." Hunter raised her eyebrows and smiled. "I always have it."

The American representative laughed as she spoke.

"I'm always pooling my ether. So instead of using my engines for ether extraction, I use them to speed up the summoning. I always keep a bunch of ether…and cook it."

"You can do that?"

Horinouchi's techniques were meant for Shinto ceremonies, rituals, and tuning of the surrounding environment, so carrying ether at all times sounded dangerous.

"Wouldn't it be a disaster if you lost control of it?"

"But you do it anyway." Hunter split the first rib. "You keep your Phlogiston Heart running at all times but don't summon your Frame. If you're worried about losing control, *you just have to be careful.*"

"That sounds like carrying a gun with the safety off."

Kagami was right and Hunter must have agreed too.

"It's actually more like having the gun cocked too. But with Ranks as high as yours, I'm sure you can do it."

"But…"

Horinouchi had her doubts. In a way, ether control was Shinto's specialty. Shinto spells like barriers and divine protections were a packaged form of ether control. But…

"Can you really build up enough willpower to summon your Magino without a battle?"

For a witch to maintain her Frame, she had to keep her Phlogiston Heart heated.

"Storing ether without summoning your Frame means to keep your Phlogiston Heart heated without summoning your Frame, but maintaining the Phlogiston Heart requires a high level of willpower."

"It does sound difficult in a stressful society," agreed Kagami.

"Take a look." Hunter turned her spell circle so they could see. "You surround yourself in some words or a scene that keep you focused. This is the American National Anthem written on the left and right. …I remember my dad singing it."

She summoned her Normal Form.

"Oh," said Koutarou and the maids.

"Summon Magino Frame!"

With those words, a structure suddenly appeared behind Hunter.

The wind whipped up as the five hundred meter magic wand appeared.

"Magino Device Hedgehog."

She had gone through her Normal Device on the way, but she had still summoned her Magino Frame right away.

That summoning would be impossible without maintaining her willpower and ether.

She smiled and clapped her hands to end the Frame summoning.

With a high-pitched sound like a steam whistle, the Hedgehog vanished into the sea. More than fall, each part fluttered down like snow and created giant pillars of water.

Waves washed in, but they did not reach their part of the beach. Hunter was wearing her swimsuit again and she smiled bitterly.

“That’s what I mean. You use up some of your pool each time you do it, but with some still built up, it’s easier to do it again. The only question is if you have the kinds of words or scene necessary.”

“I…”

Horinouchi was fairly certain she did have some words or a scene to maintain her willpower.

She recalled the night when she had said goodbye to her mother ten years before. She had carved it into her memories because she had not wanted herself or anyone else to feel anything like that again, but…

“Ah…”

The part of her memories that had left the strongest impression on her was not her mother.

It was the moon.

“——————”

The white circle floating in the blue sky seemed even more distinct than it really was.

Why? wondered Horinouchi.

…Why did I not think of my mother here?

Why did I think of the moon?

She had barely ever looked up at the moon before.

Who was it that had pointed that out?

She knew the answer: Kagami.

She had lost her mother ten years before and she had sworn revenge, but she had not been able to look up at the moon.

Only after having that pointed out had she looked to the moon. And…

…Yes, that idiot laughed.

That foreigner had looked up at the moon, turned her back, and laughed. Everyone saw that moon as a target of revenge, but she had laughed with joy and satisfaction in her voice.

That knight had not been worried about the opponent that everyone else feared they could not defeat.

She had laughed and intended to defeat it.

Mankind had been cornered, but she had announced that she had cornered the Black Witch.

It was not the moon.

The impression left on Horinouchi's memories was the announcement targeted toward the moon.

...Those words overturned my previous focus on nothing but my mother, myself, and the Black Witch.

I can't believe this, she thought.

How could those ridiculous words and that ridiculous scene be what keeps me focused?

Chapter 2

“Fun at Night”

To play with fire is to manipulate your partner

"Head Butler. Lady Mitsuru and the others are chatting, suddenly summoning their Frames, and otherwise being quite aggressive, so our remaining food supply is not looking good."

One of the maids raised her right forearm.

"Head Butler. We are all busy grilling the meat and we can't drive the truck to go shopping, so you take care of it!"

"If you need someone to drive the truck, I'm pretty sure some of you are former JSDF witches! But…"

Koutarou relaxed his shoulders and looked to the three witches who were rapidly yet politely eating through all the food.

"Head Butler. Lady Mitsuru seems to be in a good mood, so this is a good thing, isn't it?"

"Yes. I think it's good she is thinking about things other than herself."

"Head Butler. You only say that because she never showed any concern for you."

"That goes for you too, doesn't it!?"

Koutarou pointed at them all as he started walking toward the embankment.

"I forbid you from bringing out the sweets until I get back! I had to preorder those to make sure I could buy them."

"The staff later ate them with Lady Mitsuru and the others."

"That! That is what I'm afraid of! …In fact, where are they? Where's the cooler of sweets I had prepared!?"

"Eh?"

The maids exchanged a glance.

"We brought that to the headmaster before leaving. You said something about providing enough seeds to last a few days. Wasn't that the cooler?"

"Oh? Now, now, Koutarou. Why are you treating this old lady so wonderfully?"

The headmaster smiled and tilted her head when she opened the cooler on the table in her office.

"I thought this was the seeds, but is he trying to get on my good side with these sweets?"

She saw handmade pudding in beakers. They appeared to be katayaki puddings and there were more than thirty of them. *That would be why the maids had so much trouble carrying this in,* she thought with a sigh. She briefly glanced out the window where the sun was gradually setting and then she opened a spell circle.

"Faculty room, is there any room in your refrigerator? And everyone who's working today, Miss Horinouchi sent us some dessert. Come and get it."

Horinouchi grew cautious when a mysterious message of thanks arrived from the headmaster, but once she read it, it turned out to be something Koutarou had arranged. And speaking of Koutarou…

"He has heatstroke after running to the city and back in this heat? Well, I am thankful for the sweets."

The three of them were eating their beakers of pudding while taking a break on the beach.

They left Koutarou collapsed on the sand, ate a dinner that was barely distinguishable from their lunch to rebuild their strength, performed some more fine-tuning of their cannons by the waterside, and practiced the techniques they had learned in their exchange with Hunter.

She had not often had such a change to her training methods or trained so hard all at once. Plus…

…It isn't like today is the last day of summer break or anything.

Meanwhile, the maids began setting up the fireworks. Some were already waving around handheld ones, but looking at them now made it clear they were older than her.

They really were the "current" generation continuing from ten years before.

She had memories of them all teaching her things, but…

"Here. I don't know much about handheld fireworks."

She was handed some charcoal inside a hanging metal basket to light the fireworks. Feeling its heat told her the beach's temperature was beginning to fall.

Hunter must have been thinking something similar because she looked out to sea where her comrades were.

“So if what Kagami says is true, what does that mean about the position of our world?”

Kagami nodded, lit a handheld firework, held it up, and let it dangle down from her hand. The sparks coming from the tip of its longish shape changed color and gave off a unique scent as it disappeared.

When the light finally became a green chemical flame, Kagami spoke.

“You can resent me if you wish.”

“Yeah, but…what are we supposed to say?”

Hunter smiled bitterly, opened a spell circle, and displayed something on the screen.

It was a game. A witch-like character jumped through a medieval-looking city while dodging curry. It was a confusing idea for a game world, but…

“Kagami, what you’re doing is like being inside this game and speaking with us, the characters. And let’s say the way the game is made puts us at a disadvantage.”

That would mean…

“What you’re talking about is having your own character telling you to make them jump better.”

“Um, but…”

Horinouchi started to speak because she had sensed a misunderstanding in what Hunter was saying.

She did not know if Hunter really meant it or not, but she had separated them from Kagami.

…Of course, she was trying to say the characters wouldn't want to complain to the player.

But, she thought concerning Kagami as an individual.

…She's the type to get emotionally invested, you know?

She recalled when Kagami had wept on the pier. So even if Hunter categorized herself as a character, Kagami would weep for her. After all, that girl had wept over the death of Horinouchi's mother. So…

"————"

She had started to tell Hunter she was overthinking this, but she decided against it.

…I'm not that nosy.

Hunter was still having difficulty judging her distance from Kagami. And she was probably trying to swing back a little from the truths she had learned today.

In other words, Hunter was not actually trying to distance herself from Kagami.

That said, misunderstandings were frightening. They could lead to a loss.

That was what it meant to be a witch Ranker.

And that was why Hunter had said they would not complain about Kagami even if they were characters and she was the player.

That was likely Hunter’s way of providing a positive sense of distance. It was a line that would only work with Kagami.

They would most likely only grow closer from here on out. Kagami would play a role in that. She did not hide the fact that she was special and she interacted with them in a way that told them not to worry about it.

“Even if she created this world, Hunter, couldn’t you say the things that were born and raised in this world were not created by her?”

That was something they had confirmed several times today.

That was the common point between Horinouchi and Hunter, so it would tie them together here.

They would think about the present more than their worries.

Her past with her mother was important, but she had not thrown it away.

The fact that she was looking to the moon in the present was what mattered.

Hunter must have understood that because she crossed her arms and tilted her head.

“Hmm.”

“Thinking about it isn’t going to change anything.”

“You’re so strict about that kind of thing, Horinouchi.”

Hunter smiled bitterly and then looked to Kagami.

“Do you have anything to say to this ‘fool’, Kagami?”

"The fact that you are hoping for a solution is more than enough, Hunter."

Kagami responded immediately.

Horinouchi could only respond with a look of exasperation, but Kagami suddenly smiled.

"I am thankful."

She immediately swung her right arm outwards.

"Not bad."

She suddenly summoned her Magino Device.

"Was it like this?"

"Well done," said the Head Maid when she saw the sight.

Kagami had a clearly abnormal ability to control ether. The Head Maid understood that on an intellectual level, but it was simply too different from their own abilities.

…In our day, you were considered quite skilled if you could summon a Magino Frame at all.

A church bell rang behind Kagami and a giant sword was constructed.

"Magino Device Dikaiosyne. …Well done."

Hearing that, the Head Butler looked up where he had collapsed from heatstroke.

"Well, of course."

He grabbed a nearby bottle, presumably for some water, and drank some through the corner of his mouth.

“Lady Kagami is on equal footing with Lady Mitsuru!”

“Head Butler. That is the spare rib sauce.”

A new commotion began when he spat something red from his mouth and fell back to the ground.

Hunter whistled and Horinouchi gasped as they looked to the giant sword that had appeared over the ocean.

It was over five hundred meters long. That was the same length as Hunter’s Hedgehog and the Hedgehog had more volume overall, but…

…A sword just isn’t fair.

The shape alone gave off a sense of power.

“It is well-made and that was nice and fast, but…it could use some work.”

Kagami lifted the corner of her mouth and let her Magino Frame be destroyed.

The ringing of the bell split and reverberated across the ocean to Enoshima. It must have distracted the cars and motorcycles on the road beyond the embankment because horns began to honk.

But as the sword broke apart and fell, Horinouchi looked back.

“Wh-why do you say that?”

“Well.” Kagami placed a hand on her chin and looked up at the purged light scattering across the ocean. “Yes. The ether reacts to my focus by increasing the amount I acquire, but I have trouble storing it. During battle is one thing, but I have little to keep me focused during peaceful times and I cannot maintain that focus for long.”

“You should be able to do it once you know you have a battle coming up, so just keep it in mind. But anyway…”

Something else interested Hunter.

“What about you, Horinouchi? Have you thought of a way to stay focused?”

“M-me!?”

The question was so sudden that Horinouchi had nothing to say in response.

…I have nothing prepared!

Hunter had already mastered this technique and she used the American National Anthem to remain focused. For Kagami, that focus and her ether manipulation ability seemed to be the key.

But for Horinouchi…

“U-um…”

“Not to worry, milady!”

The three girls turned toward the voice and saw Koutarou getting up from where he had supposedly been sleeping off his heatstroke. He had something red staining his mouth and chest, but Horinouchi decided to pretend she had not seen it.

However…

“What is that, Horinouchi?” asked Kagami.

“Later! We’ll send him to the hospital later!”

“Who was it that could drive the truck?”

…Him…

“N-no, wait! We have some maids from the JSDF!”

“That is kind of an amazing thing to say if you think about it.”

However, those maids were currently waving their hands back and forth below the tarp. The surrounding maids were gesturing that everything was fine and that there was nothing to worry about, so they could likely ignore this.

But…

“C’mon, Horinouchi. Everyone’s waiting.”

“C-could you not put so much pressure on me!?”

At any rate, she had to think of a way to maintain her focus.

“I-in my case…”

There was something she had thought of earlier: Kagami laughing toward the moon, Kagami weeping, and…

…During the battle with Hunter.

Kagami had clearly told her to trust in her.

As someone who had always fought alone, that had felt embarrassing.

But Kagami's skill was real. Her strange actions had a way of standing out, but Horinouchi wanted to believe it was unintentional. However, using all that to maintain her focus felt…

"You do not need to force yourself, Manko."

"D-don't call me that!!"

As she shouted back, she summoned her Normal Device into her hand and her Magino Device behind her.

With the ringing of a shrine bell, the sky briefly split apart and Magino Device Akerindou appeared. The blowing wind whipped up Horinouchi's shirt and stirred up the waves at her feet.

"Hyahn!"

She took a surprised step and looked back, wondering what that was…no, wondering what had happened.

"Huh?"

…I-I did it?

She questioned it, but the results were plain as day. The Normal Device in her hand, the five hundred meter or more Akerindou behind her, and the Suzaku calmly smoking a cigarette on her shoulder were all real.

It had worked well, so she calmed her breathing.

"S-see? I did it."

Hunter and Kagami held their palms out and took three steps back.

What is that for? she wondered as Hunter glared at her.

"You grow focused when people call you Manko?"

"Dirty words get you excited, Horinouchi? Quite the covert pervert, aren't we?"

"S-stop right there! Don't just decide what kind of character I am!"

Koutarou, stop praising me and get to the hospital.

After a few visits, exchanged techniques, and emergency scrambling of the F-23s, the period of time known as summer break finally approached its end.

In the middle of Tokyo Bay, Shihouin Academy began welcoming back the witches who had returned home to or gone to train in other regions or countries. The second term had yet to begin, but the school was filled with people and voices.

After August 20, the chimes for class periods began to ring to ease the students back into the school schedule.

"I see you're methodical as ever even this early in the morning. Did you end up spending summer break here?"

"No, I did visit a few places, even if they were nearby. They were all day-trips."

A tall girl spoke inside the headmaster's office.

The headmaster stood by the window behind the large desk and the girl in a black summer sweater, a black uniform, and long socks brought her hands to the reception table.

She was looking at the potted plant on the table while protectively placing her hands around it.

Something fell from the flower into the girl's hands: ether light.

"That hasn't actually been tuned for recovery purposes. That's a perfectly natural potted plant, but they end up like that when grown somewhere with good ether line exposure."

The headmaster looked out the window to the flower garden on the north end of the large courtyard. The witch tending to it must have noticed her because the girl waved her hand. The headmaster waved casually back.

The tall girl next to the table breathed a sigh of relief and slowly removed her hands from the potted plant as if making sure not to spill any of the ether light.

"Thank you for showing me something so lovely. Now, about my request…"

"Yes, that is not such a gentle topic. Why do you want to challenge Miss Kagami to a match?"

"I do think I would be best off challenging the #1 instead of someone ranked lower."

She seemed to stab her fingernails into her short white hair and brushed it back.

"Oh, dear," lightly said the headmaster, but the girl bowed in silence.

"My apologies." The girl nodded. "But I cannot bear to let that great criminal Kagami Kagami live."

"I see."

The headmaster smiled bitterly without rejecting that reason or providing any other feedback.

"Then there's no helping it. Um…"

As soon as she said that, the headmaster saw something.

Or rather, she saw nothing. The girl had already vanished from the office.

She had announced her plan to challenge Kagami and that was it.

"Oh, dear. Is she saying she'll do this even if I stop her? What an impatient girl."

She smiled bitterly and looked out the window.

"Such a shame when you can see the fruits of this final summer out the window."

She looked back to the flower garden outside and waved back when the girl watering it waved up at her.

"It looks like we're going to make it in time, Mitsuyo."

Chapter 3

“When the Current of the World…”

Gathers in the world, the world begins

The second term began.

Quite a bit of summer heat remained and the clouds were still sparse in the sky yet had not taken their scattered form for autumn. Those white clouds formed a barrier as they welled up from below and cut into the wind, but the faint shape of the white moon could be seen in the blue sky beyond them.

One could look up at that moon from two kinds of places.

The first was a wide-open place.

The second was a tall place.

One spot had both: Tokyo Bay.

A facility covered a wide area on an artificial island built in the center of that bay.

It was a school. A high school. The buildings in the four cardinal directions were school buildings for the different division and their dorms. The name on the sign was Shihouin Academy.

A two-story dining hall was located to the northwest of the campus.

It was a glass-sided building, but someone was looking up into the midday moon from the terrace on the roof.

Tables and chairs were prepared across the terrace and three people sat at one of the central tables. The students at the other tables a short distance away were giving them curious looks.

“What did you do this time, Horinouchi?”

"I-it wasn't me. I'm betting this is about Hunter returning on a fighter jet last night."

"Everyone knows I always do that, so it wouldn't gather any attention. Maybe Kagami is still standing out a little."

"No, I am a perfectly normal person who cannot even use much magic. …So what did you do this time, Horinouchi?"

"I already said I didn't do anything. Stop pushing on that topic."

Hunter was the one to hold out her palms and tell them to calm down. Then she looked around.

"I bet I know what it is. The Rank 4 and some strange girl clashed just before summer break. Then they formed a buddy group, challenged the #3 and took her place. And after summer break, all three of them are eating lunch together. How could that *not* gather attention?" Hunter looked to the other two. "How is the General Division viewing this?"

That's a good question, thought Horinouchi.

The sunshine was a little bright, so she placed a large sunblock spell overhead and lightly spun it around to shade the three of them like a parasol.

"Kagami has been telling the story and exaggerating to make things more exciting, so everyone's kind of accepted it in a weird way."

"For example?"

“Remember how she pursued you after you vanished off of the American coast?”

“Oh, yeah. So they’ve all been exposed to the insane story of a crazy person shooting another crazy person who used the power of that shot to accelerate?”

“Yes, but in the version of the story spreading through the General Division, a pod of dolphins told Kagami which way you had gone.”

“Dolphins?”

“Yes.”

Horinouchi could only nod, but Kagami turned toward them, looking taken aback.

“You have that all wrong, Horinouchi. …There was a pure white dolphin in the middle of the pod!!”

“Are you sure you weren’t hallucinating!?”

“Ha ha ha. I do not know if they are all very trusting or if they just like getting worked up over that kind of thing, but I appreciate it.”

But that was not all.

“I’ll omit most of it, but in the version of the story going around, your karate uniform tore when you were defeated. And after we reconciled our differences, you shouted ‘Ahh, you can see my skin! How shameful!’, so Kagami lent you her coat.”

“Don’t drag me into it! I’m not that kind of character!”

"Come to think of it, how does the Special Equipment Division view that Ranker battle?"

"Eh?" said Hunter as she looked up into the sky and seemed to stare at something.

"You don't have to tell us if you don't want to."

"It's not that. You know how there's always room for improvements with machines, right? Well, no one wants to deal with complaints, but if there's an improvement you can make, you want to do it, right?"

"So you've all gathered together to improve your equipment?"

"Everyone kept showing up asking about when I lost, so it was kind of discouraging. But I gradually managed to calm down some and figured out what I'd done wrong."

Yes, I suppose Hunter was the victim this time, thought Horinouchi as she took a sip of the iced tea on the table.

And there was something else she needed to ask now.

"The second term has begun and Hexennacht is coming up at the end of October, so I'd like to move on to the next Ranker battle soon."

"Indeed," said Kagami. "Even if the battle with the Black Witch is not until the end of October, we still have to work with and cooperate with the other organizations preparing for that battle. Each nation needs to be preparing for both the possibility of winning Hexennacht and the possibility of losing it. We only have our battles with the Rank 2 and Rank 1 left, but if we do not settle that this month or early next month, we might be stopped by interference from elsewhere.”

“I think the headmaster will announce the end of the Ranker battles around the end of September. If we knew the exact date now, some people would probably begin fighting more fiercely as it approached, but the headmaster wants to see our skill during normal conditions.”

“Have any lower ranked challengers come to you, Hunter?”

“Oh, one from the Special Equipment Division did, but we settled that inside our building the night before last.”

“That was fast.”

“Well, yeah.” Hunter smiled bitterly. “It was really more of a test for my Hedgehog now that it’s been fixed. I couldn’t summon the Magino Frame since we did it indoors, but I smashed up the hallway and classroom pretty bad. But now that they know I’m still a force to be reckoned with, I doubt any others will try to push their way up any time soon. More importantly…”

Hunter looked at both Horinouchi and Kagami before looking to the witches surrounding them at a distance.

“If you two move up to Rank 2, I’ll have an easier time dealing with the lower ranked witches. I’ll be able to work with the former Rank 2 to act as a shield.”

Horinouchi was briefly confused by Hunter’s words.

“Why are you willing to go that far?”

“To be blunt, we do not mind at all if you want a rematch.”

Hunter kept her eyes on their surroundings and reached for her glass on the table.

“With a Frame on the Hedgehog’s scale, the damage from a single battle can take a lot of time to repair.”

“Meaning…?”

“I didn’t expect to have it completely destroyed in the battle against you two. If I fought you again now, I wouldn’t have enough time left to take on the Rank 2 and 1 afterwards.”

“Do you regret fighting us?” asked Kagami.

“You’re the ones that challenged me, aren’t you? I tried to crush Kagami first in a preemptive strike, and I still think that was the right decision. If the two of you had taken the fight to me, it would have been like starting from the situation off of Brazil in our second battle. My odds of victory would’ve been even lower then.”

Now that the girl mentioned it, Horinouchi had a feeling that was indeed how it would have turned out.

“So,” said Hunter with an exasperated glare. “My advantage had completely evaporated once you two met up off of Brazil.”

“You sound like you have something to say.”

“Normally, people don’t just recover from damage and injuries like that.”

“Well, that is just how excellent my Dikaio is.”

Kagami produced the dragon child from a spell circle. It had no idea what was going on and simply looked around worriedly. Meanwhile, Suzaku appeared on Horinouchi's shoulder and began performing shadow Muay Thai as if to threaten the other servant, so was it really a divine beast?

Hunter leaned back in her seat as if to say "anyway".

"So you're going to challenge the #2, right?"

"We have no other choice."

"I see," said Hunter, so Horinouchi asked her something.

"Do you know something about the #2?"

"Well," said Hunter as she looked up into the sky. "Can I order something?"

"We still have fifth period, so try to avoid anything that will get your hands dirty."

"A rib sandwich it is, then."

"You really do like meat, don't you?"

Hunter ignored Horinouchi while linking a spell circle to the dining hall application and placing an order.

…Oh, they have their seasonal menu out. Chestnuts, hm? No, thanks. I'm trying to fill my stomach here.

"Umm, does anyone want a dessert?"

"I'll take whatever you're having."

"That'll be a fried pork tenderloin sandwich."

“How is that a dessert!?”

“It’s a secondary meat.”

She confirmed the order. The bill was transmitted to her spell circle, so she passed it over to Kagami while getting back on topic.

“The #2 is a foreigner from some other country.”

“You’re a foreigner too, aren’t you?”

“Oh, well, yes.”

…If she’s not from the US either, then she’s a foreigner to me too!

It was a mystery whether Shinto people just viewed everything from a Japanese perspective or if Horinouchi was viewing her as one of her own.

However, Hunter did not understand everything about this either.

“The thing about the #2 witch is…she’s an absolute single.”

“I’ve heard that too,” agreed Horinouchi.

…Then I guess Kagami is the only one who doesn’t know anything.

She decided to think of this exchange of information as being for Kagami’s sake. For Horinouchi, this would only be supplementing her information. *In that case,* thought Hunter, but then Kagami asked a question.

“What do you mean by an absolute single?”

"She isn't supported by a nation like I am, but she fights using a vast pool of spell power. I guess you could call it the ultra-orthodox route."

"What do we know about her abilities?" asked Kagami.

Hunter looked to Horinouchi. However…

"———"

The shrine maiden shook her head.

There was a reason that response made sense to Hunter.

"I don't know that much either. Barely anything is known about the #2."

"What do you mean?"

"For example, how much information did you have on my Hedgehog, Horinouchi?"

"Well…"

Horinouchi trailed off, but finally continued.

"That it was supported by the US military, that it had extremely thick armor, and that it had a sharpshooting ability rivaling my own. I also knew you used American karate. …I think that covers it."

"High Rankers didn't end up in their position because they lost to someone. The position is usually decided by their grades up to that point. That's why high Rankers generally don't know much about each other's abilities. And the witches that lose to them don't reveal much information about them."

"So they can be the ones to defeat them in a rematch?"

“That’s right.” Hunter simply nodded. “If they leak the information, the witch that’s risen above them will receive a concentrated attack from the other witches and be defeated. However, that won’t increase their own rank. They lost to that higher Ranker, so they’re stuck below them. And since the witch who does defeat them will move up, their rank will even drop.”

“That is why witches like to fight where no one can see them and why they don’t like revealing what happened in those battles.”

“That made the barrage of questioning to improve my Hedgehog all the more painful,” said Hunter. “Oh, and revealing my information acts as a show of force for America, so mine is actually pretty well known. Horinouchi, you don’t hide much of yours either, do you?”

“To rise within the General Division and for my duties as student council president, I have to remain more diplomatic. Also, I personally find it to be unfair, so I dislike hiding things.”

“Actually, would there be any point in hiding your information?”

“What do you mean?”

When she was asked that, Hunter could only turn to Kagami who turned to face her as well.

“Hunter, as someone who has experienced it firsthand, it is your duty to tell her.”

“Okay…”

She decided she might as well.

“When all you do is attack, attack, attack, there’s no point in hiding anything.”

“Yes, Manko has a lot of brute strength.”

“I-I have decent speed too, you know!?”

“Isn’t that more thanks to that strange creature on your shoulder?”

“Since the Suzaku guarantees her speed, she probably focuses entirely on attack,” added Kagami.

“W-what does it matter? And it’s fine if everyone knows by this point.”

Horinouchi then asked a question.

“Um, in that case, what about the #1? Do you know anything, Hunter?”

She was skipping past the #2 to the #1.

Hunter thought the girl was getting ahead of herself, but she could answer this one. After all…

“I don’t know a thing.”

Yes. She did not know anything and that was why she could answer.

“All of the previous #2 witches dropped in the ranks after losing to her and she’s been in that top spot for ten years now. Everyone who loses to her won’t say a word about her identity. From what I’ve heard, the current #2 got the spot due to her grades after the previous one dropped down.”

“So this one is a secret too?”

“Well, according to the rumors I’ve heard, she hides her face behind a mask and is completely overwhelming.”

Those three and all the witches around them exchanged a glance at that one.

They seemed to be searching among themselves and their gazes finally stopped on a witch from Polynesia who was wearing a giant witch doctor mask.

She quickly began waving her hands back and forth.

“No, I’m from the General Division.”

“Oh, yeah. That’s right!”

“And the witch doctor shaman style is slow to get started, so there aren’t any in the top Rankers, right?”

“Is it true you don’t wear any clothes back home!?”

Their excitement showed the amazing depth and breadth of the world of witches.

At any rate, the #1 did not seem to be here.

…She’s the top of the Honors Division and the Honors Division itself is pretty much a giant secret itself.

It was for the specialized people who could call themselves witches based on their individual power without being tied down to an existing style of witch.

Due to their specialization, they were incredibly powerful against anyone who had never seen them before. But information on those techniques would leak out after a few battles.

Once that happened, a group countermeasure would be more powerful. Due to their specialization, their system was theirs alone. Since they would have to take on that group countermeasure on their own, they statistically tended to lose any rematches.

However, one of them had held onto the top position for a very long time. And…

“I’ve heard no one has ever challenged the #1 to a rematch.”

“So they’re all that utterly defeated?”

“I don’t know, but those are the facts. …And the US has decided that’s one thing that has guided the previous generation of witches to retire over the past ten years. In other words…”

Kagami took over from there.

“For the past ten years, some witches who have graduated as students continue on as Rankers, but one thing that leads them to retire as Rankers is to challenge the #1? Is that what you are saying? So the #1 tells them through defeat that they should retire, even though they have reached the peak of their skills?” asked Kagami. “Then we should sense danger in facing this #1.”

“Yes, you-…”

Just as Hunter began to respond, she swallowed the words.

…This is…

Before she could think “dangerous”, her left forearm shot up.

“Summon Hedgehog!”

Kagami saw a shield.

It was a five meter Normal Device and it was a shape she had seen a lot recently.

“The Hedgehog?”

However, Hunter was looking to the terrace’s entrance while blocking Kagami’s view with the Hedgehog.

She was likely protecting her from something there, but…

“Hunter, what is-…?”

“Don’t try to peek!”

Hunter scolded her. Wondering what was going on, she looked to Horinouchi.

“Kagami, can you sense things using ether?”

“Just to make sure, you have not forgotten where I am from, have you? It is a peaceful world where talking about ether will only get you blank stares in return. No one suddenly shouts ‘Killer intent…!?’ in the middle of the city before moving back three meters.”

“W-well sorry for being weird, but that’s what’s happening here!”

“Oh, that is wonderful, Hunter. Now, whose killer intent is it? And I probably should not ask something like this out of curiosity, but what does killer intent feel like? Is it a tickling on the back of your neck? Does your vision grow distorted? Do you hear a strange musical note? Oops, I asked out of curiosity anyway. …So what exactly are you doing?”

“Kagami… Hunter isn’t doing this because she’s sick in the head. She’s trying to be nice.”

“Th-that kind of help hurts most of all!” shouted Hunter.

Hunter looked past the shield.

The other witches were also looking beyond the Hedgehog.

That seemed to be why she lifted up the shield.

She had not summoned her Form and the movement of her left arm raised the shield pile so its muzzle pointed straight forward.

Kagami looked forward with the Hedgehog raised overhead like an umbrella.

She heard the other witches speaking behind her.

“It’s really her…”

In that case, the person facing them was probably quite well known.

“I am a third year in the Spell Division as well as the Rank 2.”

The voice from directly ahead was more dignified than calm.

“I am Mary Sue.”

Horinouchi recognized the girl.

…Black and white.

Her clothing was almost entirely black. She wore a black summer sweater over her uniform instead of the standard coat and her skirt was black too. The socks that rose to the top of her thighs were black with defensive emblems woven in. She wore gloves even though it was summer and they too were black.

…That makes the white of her hair stand out even more.

She was tall and the black outfit made her look all the sharper for it.

“That’s…”

“You know who she is, Horinouchi!?” asked Kagami.

“Yes.”

At that moment, someone else stepped up to the side of the table. They had come from the dining hall with a rib sandwich and two fried pork tenderloin sandwiches and they served the plates from a tray.

“She is Lady Mary Sue, the Spell Division’s ace who is also known as ‘The Hitman’.”

“Koutarou!? When did you show up!?”

Koutarou bowed and began providing them with fresh iced teas.

“I am holding negotiations with this dining hall.”

Do you mean you’re working part-time? she wondered, but she left it unsaid.

“I would expect no less from you, Koutarou,” said Kagami while accepting her new glass. “Now, about that girl…”

Kagami indicated the girl named Mary who was standing with her heels together. She was clearly facing Horinouchi, but she bowed without looking her in the eye.

“Miss Horinouchi,” she said in her dignified voice. “Congratulations on your promotion to Rank 3. As you now have the right to challenge me, I will go ahead and designate you in advance.”

Horinouchi moved her heels a little forward and placed them on the floor so she could move at any time.

Hunter also lowered her hips down in her chair.

Kagami calmly drank her tea, but that was just the kind of person she was.

“You want to…fight us?”

“It would seem so,” said Kagami. “Such a strange person, picking a fight with someone ranked lower than her.”

“Hey.”

“Kagami, sometimes people just feel like doing something crazy like that.”

“Hold it, you two.”

“I see, Horinouchi. I suppose people cannot always make rational decisions with Hexennacht so close.”

“If you’ve got something to say to me, at least face me.”

“How about I order you a teriyaki burger, Hunter?”

“All is forgiven.”

That seemed to be how that worked.

Horinouchi had said “us” as a test, but she could not see Mary’s expression since the girl’s head was still bowed. In fact, Horinouchi started feeling bad for chatting like that while the girl kept her head lowered.

But then she heard a voice.

It was Mary’s.

“There is something I would like to do before fighting the #1.”

There was no change in her tone of voice as she spoke toward the floor.

“What is-…?”

Before Horinouchi could ask her question, Mary raised her head.

She had a slight smile on her lips.

Her short hair was briefly lifted toward the sky and ether light scattered around her.

She most likely had a defensive or bodily reinforcement divine protection active at all times.

However, Mary lowered her head for another bow.

"Goodbye."

She did not intend to answer Horinouchi's question.

She turned around and the surrounding witches opened a path.

…That was well done.

Horinouchi thought on Mary's behavior and the movements of the surrounding witches.

…She understands her position.

She was Rank 2. If anyone challenged her and won, they would gain that position.

Even if it was forceful, would anyone really overlook that opportunity with Hexennacht so close? But…

"To be a witch truly is to be a technician and witches themselves are the result of that work."

The leaving girl was already a fair distance away. Kagami spoke while observing Mary's steady but not swift pace.

"When seeing a glass and its quality, no one can help but imagine how it was made. And no one will think of pouring an unbefitting drink into it. Such excellent pride."

"Well said," said Hunter as she let the Hedgehog disperse.

The amount of ether light left behind was far more than one would have imagined from its original size, so the surrounding witches responded in surprise.

"So? What're you going to do?"

"Good question."

A Ranker battle was exactly what they wanted, but…

"Can you look into her abilities and history, Koutarou?"

"Yes, I can do as much as I can, milady."

"Did you look into me like that, Horinouchi?"

"You attacked us before we could."

"Do not forget that I was the one that defended against that."

Why did Kagami feel the need to assert herself there? But…

"So what would you have done if you had looked into me?"

"Well…"

As Horinouchi thought, she saw Hunter and Kagami whispering to each other.

"What are you saying, Hunter? She would end up shooting like crazy either way."

"Yeah, is there any point in her looking into anything?"

"H-hold it! Don't treat me like I'm a human cannon!"

Then again, that is what happened off the coast of Brazil.

Koutarou was in a bit of a hurry after that.

When a higher Ranker challenged a lower Ranker to a Ranker battle, the lower ranked one could not refuse. If Mary Sue challenged them, they would have to respond no matter when or where it was.

So if possible, he wanted to have some amount of information by the end of school that day. After all, it was possible Mary Sue would attack them on the way back from school.

But Mary was from the Spell Division.

Since ancient times, most witches were made to take classes in that division.

They were "made to" because those who did not already have the techniques would still have to learn the ancient witch techniques there. Students from other division would go there for special lessons and many people learned in the library and classrooms there.

…The Spell Division would have been the standard route for Lady Mitsuru when joining the school.

After all, she was the representative of Japanese Shinto. That made her a representative of an entire faction of witches.

However, he knew why Horinouchi had chosen the General Division.

Her mother Mitsuyo had gone to Shihouin Academy and had been in the General Division. Of course, Japan had not had a school that specialized in facing Hexennacht back then.

However, her mother had competed with the other witches there who had been formidable foes indeed and she had gained trustworthy comrades there. In that way, joining the General Division was something of a "jinx" for Horinouchi.

Cerisier, the headmaster and one of the Three Sages, had allowed it.

And now she had comrades in Kagami and Hunter, so she was doing quite well. However…

“Excuse me!”

Koutarou knew a way of acquiring the necessary information on short notice.

Information had a way of gathering where witches gathered. So…

“Horinouchi Maid Squad, please give me the information I need to help Lady Mitsuru!!”

…This prostration is quite cool, everyone.

In the Head Maid’s opinion, the Horinouchi Maid Squad could rival an army.

After all, about five percent of the witches that graduated Shihouin Academy and retired as Rankers ended up there. Most of them joined because “going home would be a pain”, but they most likely had a different real reason.

The Horinouchi Family contained one of the Three Sages, it was the Shinto representative, the daughter of the family was quite skilled, and…

“Probably the biggest reason is that we do not ask about their past as far as battles are concerned.”

The Horinouchi mansion was a three-story building on a hill in the center of a nature park in Shinagawa. Tokyo Bay and

Shihouin Academy could be seen from there and it was the Horinouchi family’s base.

Currently, someone was prostrating in front of the maids cleaning the central entrance hall.

It was the Head Butler.

His combat abilities were honestly quite low, but more importantly…

“I will commend your dedication to serving Lady Mitsuru. As well as your recognition that, as a whole, we are the best for this job.”

“Can’t you go one step further!?”

“But this concerns our past battles.”

“Yes,” said a voice from the hall’s staircase. A maid there held a long feather duster. She sat on the railing and looked down at the others.

“I believe she is the one I had a Ranker battle with last year. I think that was when she moved up into the top fifty. I retired afterwards, though.”

“Be quiet. We need a little more before we can give him our information.”

A single glance and the maid moved back.

The prostrating head was sinking into the carpet in front of the Head Maid. It was an excellent prostration.

And she did understand why he was in such a hurry.

"Listen. We complete our daily work and have many feelings for Lady Mitsuru, but we simply wish to be involved in Hexennacht, Head Butler. If we are to step up onto the stage, it will be on Hexennacht. We will fill the gaps in the battlefield that U.A.H. cannot fill and we will make sure this land Lady Mitsuyo protected will be passed onto the next generation. Our pasts are only to be used to support Lady Mitsuru. Besides," she said. "What would you do if we told you about the #2 now?"

"I would be able to provide commentary for Lady Mitsuru!"

"That is not enough." The Head Maid kneeled down and spoke down toward the Head Butler. "You must pass the information onto her so she understands it herself. We do not want to hear you providing commentary. It is when Lady Mitsuru provides commentary that we can exclaim, 'Well done, milady!' If it is to that end, then we will provide you with the information."

…I sure ate a lot at lunch.

Hunter heard the afterschool bell as she left the Special Equipment Division building and made her way to another building: the General Division dorm.

After what had happened at lunch, they had arranged to hold a strategy meeting.

The Special Equipment Division building was on Shihouin Academy's west side and the General Division dorm was on the southeast side.

"It'd be faster to cut through the courtyard."

With that decided, she rushed along.

She saw the General Division dorm a lot. It was located near the school's main gate on the south and she often saw it as a "pretty building" when returning by air as she was wont to do.

The Special Equipment Division dorm was simple and sturdy for a dorm and its exterior looked a lot like a factory, so the Special Equipment Division students often commented on the design of the overhanging upper floors of the General Division dorm.

Then again, they were usually dangerous comments along the lines of, "I bet the whole thing would come crumbling down if I destroyed that part". Still, it was fun getting to actually go inside it. *It's all about having connections,* she thought as she cut through the forested courtyard and to the central pathway.

She decided to follow that to the southern loop, but…

"Oh."

She spotted a familiar face to the north which was on her left.

It was someone she felt like she had only just met.

"Hey, there."

A tall figure in black stood on the courtyard's central pathway.

"Mary Sue, do you need me for something?"

Chapter 4

“Different Sorts of People”

Reality has natural extraterritoriality, doesn’t it?

Hunter immediately summoned her Normal Device.

The ether light and engine noises shook the courtyard forest's trees.

The leaves were still in their summer colors, but the shaking would have scattered the leaves everywhere had it been autumn.

Her hair fluttered in the wind.

…Wow.

This is like a duel, she thought as she asked the question on her mind.

"Were you waiting for me?"

"Why would you think that?"

"This is too much to be a coincidence."

"You can think of it that way if you want."

Mary began to move.

…Oh.

Hunter saw the girl casually hang a plastic bag on a nearby branch. However…

…That was fast!

She had not rushed the action, but there was no wasted movement and it had great speed due to the great reach provided by her height. She had clearly taken fewer steps than would normally have been necessary, but perhaps due to her excellent balance, it looked perfectly natural.

She was not strengthened by any kind of spell. It was pure martial arts.

“Um…”

“Yes?”

Once Mary returned to the center of the path, Hunter asked an honest question.

“Are you always like *that*?”

“Like what?”

So she is.

This could be bad. She might know how impressive that action was, but she doesn’t find it strange.

Hunter remembered how suddenly the girl had vanished when leaving the dining hall. She may have been moving “like a normal person” back then out of concern for Hunter’s group and the surrounding people.

But…

“Are you asking for a fight?”

“I believe you are the one preparing to attack me.”

“True enough.”

Hunter was Rank 4 and her opponent was Rank 2. That was within the acceptable range for a Ranker battle, but Mary had challenged Rank 3 Kagami and Horinouchi to a battle.

It was out of the ordinary for Hunter to attack now, but there was something she had to say.

"Do you think you can just leave after sending killer intent my way?"

She was referring to lunchtime and now.

She did not know if this meeting was a coincidence or not, but…

"This is the second time."

Mary was blatantly sending killer intent toward her.

"The first time it was directed at Kagami, but I think you could say I was included in that."

"Are you asking for a fight?"

Provoking her was meaningless. Mary's tone and words made that clear, so…

"What if I…"

Just as Hunter planned to ask "am", Mary continued in her previous tone.

"What can you do with that Normal Device?"

"What?"

As soon as Hunter expressed her confusion, a few spell circles appeared by her hands.

…Damage detected!?

She looked up and she saw it.

The ram and ether pile had been entirely torn off from the front of the Hedgehog.

Hunter briefly recalled the specs of her Device.

The pile section of her Normal Device had the same super armor and hardness as the Magino Frame. The ram's armor was thinner, but it was essentially the same as the Magino.

And yet they had been easily torn away.

She initially wondered how that was possible, but the answer was obvious. The Hedgehog servant inside her spell circle was bristling its spines as it looked at the Device.

It seemed to be surprised, so…

…It doesn't know!!

They knew what had happened, but they did not know how it had happened.

Hunter knew that was a very dangerous situation. Including the fact that she had no countermeasure to take. But…

…Well, knowing that is enough.

That thought filled her with an odd feeling.

Upon seeing the power of a higher Ranker, she felt something beyond surprise or a threat.

"Not bad."

She felt impressed.

Mary was puzzled by the casual whistle she heard.

…What kind of reaction is that?

It was a little difficult to respond to. After all…

"What is with you? And after I went to the trouble of lying in wait for you here."

"Just out of curiosity, what would you have done if I'd followed the path around instead of cutting through the courtyard?"

"I was tracking your location, so I would have cut you off on the southern edge."

"I see." Hunter's eyes moved to the plastic bag hanging from a branch. "You were out shopping, but you spotted me and decided to pick a fight, huh? I'll admit that counts as both a coincidence and lying in wait."

Hunter's tone continued to confuse Mary.

…She seems awfully calm.

"I thought you were the type to fill with animosity and charge at me."

"Oh." Hunter clapped her hands together as if in understanding. "Were you planning to defeat me when I did in order to get those two worked up against you?"

The comment came with a laugh. Instead of a mocking laugh it was one of true amusement. "Ha ha," laughed the Special Equipment Division representative as she raised her right hand.

"Then I'm done."

"You're done?"

"Yeah, that's right." Hunter shrugged. "I saw what you're capable of when you cut my weapon down to size. That's enough for me."

"What could you possibly understand from that?"

"I may not understand it, but those two and the people who support me can look into it. The Hedgehog's got a good memory, you see."

She spread her mouth horizontally and smiled a little.

"Besides, I gave my Rank to those two. I'm not going to be bait for you, so there's nothing more for me to do."

"After how desperate you were to defeat the Black Witch?"

"So you knew about that."

Mary could only nod.

The Spell Division was linked to the history of witches and few of the witches in it had any attack power to speak of. They primarily followed an older style that turned them into a walking spell book of charms and jinxes from the Middle Ages or earlier.

However, they were second to none in chemical, mineral, environmental, and especially revelation and divination spells.

That was why Mary's division colleagues used magic to gather information. More than just standalone spells, they would combine their spells with a computer to provide a focal point they could draw the information from.

There were spells to tell you what path to take and spells to tell you who would become your lover, so if you needed to know a specific person's history or feelings, the Spell Division was where to go.

History was a continuous sequence of information.

Compared to the history of witches, acquiring information on a single person was like collecting a pebble on the roadside. So…

"In that context, I am curious about this change that has come over you."

"Don't expect me to say too much. Even I'm confused by some of it."

"Is that so?"

"Yeah. So how about you-…"

Hunter released her Normal Device.

The ether light scattered faster than Mary's information had said. Kagami Kagami had absorbed her ether light fragments in their previous battle, so this was likely a countermeasure against that.

That showed she had not lost sight of herself as a Ranker. So…

"————"

Mary naturally moved right up to Hunter.

It only took two steps.

…Impossible!

Hunter was honestly shocked.

She used her foothold spell and swing-by method for mobility, but even with bodily reinforcement divine protections…

…I couldn’t move sixteen meters in a step and a half without a running start!

It would probably take her two and a half steps. The difference in reach was obviously part of it, but that was not all. The bodily reinforcement divine protections were blatantly over the limit. No one would use that much on a daily basis.

But, she thought. *This is the Rank 2.*

As Mary leaped forward while leaning forward, Hunter hurried backwards. If she jumped back before Mary could take the final half step, she could put some distance between them. But…

“No fair!”

A surprise attack reached her. And it was made with the skill of the Rank 2.

But nothing was off limits for witches. They were originally the people who had been shunned after those in power deemed them heretics. There was no such thing as “no fair” here. She could not fight reality.

…But…!

Hunter knew she was not the best one to say this, but she sensed something similar to herself in Mary.

She could tell this girl had lived a life in which battle was perfectly normal. In other words…

“Do you belong to a combat family or organization!?”

As soon as she asked that, a chilly sensation ran through her side.

She did not think she had been hit. After all, the sensation did not fully reach the skin. Instead she thought, *Way to go, me.*

And while she was at it…

“I can see that!”

Just as her opponent had finished her half step and prepared to take the next step, the girl had launched an attack from midair.

Hunter had seen Mary pull her right hand back.

…I need to watch out for the tip of that hand!

Spells could be used without summoning a Frame, so was the chill on her side just now the same as what had torn away the tip of the Hedgehog? It did not particularly matter if those were two different things. After all…

…There!

Hunter attacked.

She was in midair, but she was on the way to landing.

Her opponent would have to stop briefly to take her next step.

Hunter dropped her heel down. She used the landing motion of her back step to place all of her falling weight on her heel.

She did not target her opponent’s approaching hand.

She targeted further up, at the wrist.

“————————”

She hit.

Her heel gouged into her opponent’s right wrist from above. Or she meant to.

…Oh.

She felt a chill on the back of her dropping right thigh, so…

“…Toh!”

Hunter made a hook with the heel on her opponent’s right wrist and she rotated it backwards.

Mary was impressed.

…So this is the former Rank 3!

Mary had thrust her right arm forward, but Hunter had stepped on the wrist and launched her entire body backwards. And while spinning around at that.

It was said close-range witches could easily stand on top of a blade during a battle, but Mary had not expected the girl to use her attacking hand as footing during such a high-speed exchange.

She had gotten a blow in on Mary’s arm, and…

…She made a jump without her foothold spell!

Hunter flew through the air.

The rotating path her body took showed no sign of rushing. To leap as far back and as far away as she could, she made a powerful swing of her lower legs and slid them outwards to spin around.

Plus, she had already taken a fighting stance as she fell and she was aiming to make a counterattack.

“Well done!”

“You too!”

Mary reached the former Rank 3 as soon as the girl landed.

She made a jab.

She launched her right forearm straight ahead.

Her summer sweater’s sleeve could not keep up, so it exposed her arm from wrist to elbow. The black leather glove was carried with enough speed that the outline of the fingernails could be seen.

“———————”

Hunter leaned her body forward as she moved back.

Her raised right elbow attempted to deflect Mary’s right hand.

“…”

But a tremor of apparent hesitation ran through Hunter’s body.

She then made a decision.

She did not block Mary’s right hand.

She still reflected Mary's arm, but she used the time lag of the tremor to send her guarding arm to the inner side of Mary's wrist.

…An excellent decision!

Hunter had not made a mistake.

If her opponent's right hand was the focal point of her spell…

…Then blocking her right hand with my arm would be risky!

That would be like blocking a blade with her arm.

No, I still don't know what kind of spell it is, but it's probably dangerous. I mean, some people launch their spells from their hand, but does anyone do it from their wrist? Hm? But that American wrestler witch I fought back in the States did place a cutting spell on the inside of her elbow for a lariat. Well, she did complain that it was an "Axe Bomber" instead of a lariat, but hell if I know what that means.

So when a brief tremor ran through her body, she had used the time lag of shifting to an attack stance in order to adjust the timing of her guard.

She had been in the middle of back stepping, but she had used the momentum of leaning forward to power the blow coming from her right shoulder.

She used her right arm to guard and parry her opponent's right wrist out to the left.

Then she sent her right fist toward the center of the girl’s (surprisingly large) chest.

That would make for a counterattack.

But…

“————”

She made a change of plans.

She could not make a counterattack. She called off her attack and back stepped away. After all…

…Not good!

Sensing danger in the Rank 2’s movements, she hurried herself by snapping her entire body backwards.

…Will I make it in time!?

A second solid sound rang out between them.

Hunter’s body was knocked backwards, but she managed to hit something herself.

A direct kick from Hunter knocked Mary’s left wrist back.

Hunter used the force of the kick to perform another backflip and place her hands on the ground. Her fingers caught at the mold of the central path’s stone pavement and she leaped backwards while regaining control of her position.

…That was close! What was that!?

While taking her landing position, Hunter felt a mixture of panic and admiration in her heart.

She had definitely almost been hit by some kind of strange attack.

It had not been a jab.

Her opponent had launched a high-speed strike with a long reach.

The danger had come from the tip of the girl's hand, so Hunter had started by knocking her wrist outwards. Then she had prepared to make a counterattack with her right hand.

Her opponent had done two things in response.

First, Mary sent out her left hand to match Hunter's counterattack.

It came from further out than Hunter's counterattack and it was aimed at her face.

Hunter could not see Mary's left hand because her swinging right forearm was in the way.

…That means the right is a decoy and the left is the real one!

She did not care.

She only had to instantly lean her body forward toward her opponent's left side. That would move her face below the left hand targeting it.

Her counterattack would then strike Mary's solar plexus instead of her chest.

Hunter would completely lose her back stepping movement. She had to fully step forward in order to lean her upper body forward like that.

It was a lot like making a full-body tackle.

After making up her mind, she prepared to take the step. But that was when it happened.

…*Hold on.*

Something seemed off about Mary's left arm.

The left arm seemed positioned to push her opponent's right hand out of the way, but then its strength vanished.

If that was to push it inwards, Hunter would have understood, but Mary's arm did not do that. The inner edge of the forearm lost its strength from the tendon and moved away from Hunter.

What was this?

Hunter instinctually understood thanks to her experience in making physical strikes.

When making a high-speed strike, one could not clench their fist before launching it.

One had to relax their hand and arm and build up acceleration by gathering strength starting from the shoulder, the foot, or somewhere else far removed from the point of impact. Only after building up all the acceleration would they clench their fist and make the punch.

So why had Mary relaxed the inner edge of her right arm?

There was only one answer: she was making an instantaneous sweep from outside Hunter's guard.

Hunter did not know what kind of attack that would be, but…

"The left was the decoy and the right's the real one!"

In that case, the left jab had been meant to cut off Hunter's escape by making her lean and step forward.

And the true attack…

…The sweeping right arm!

Hunter immediately made up her mind: no one was stupid enough to use themselves as a guinea pig here.

So she used her forward-stepping foot that was outside her opponent's field of vision. She made a kick against Mary's left wrist.

…Will I make it!?

Before her opponent's sweeping right arm could reach her, she bent backwards and flew low through the air.

She leaped.

Hunter knew she had dodged it.

She flipped once and landed in a low stance.

However, Mary leaped after her.

She was fast, but more importantly…

…What's with that stance!?

Hunter had just dodged Mary's sweeping right arm by kicking back off of the girl's left arm.

Her opponent had just swung her right arm inwards and had her left arm knocked backwards.

In other words, she should have spun a little to the left.

But that was not the case.

Hunter saw Mary's back.

She had given herself over to the rotation and she used the tornado spin to attack with a right backhand blow.

…This girl!

Her right hand was no longer making a jab.

The backhand's trajectory was entirely in the sweeping form.

Her right arm drew a crescent moon-like arc as it flew diagonally downwards.

It was coming, but…

"Wah."

Hunter saw something scattering to her left.

It was her bangs. They had probably been cut in the previous attack.

A few tufts had been taken out near enough to the base for Hunter to think, *Hey, wait. If I have to cut it all this short to match, it'll really make me look like a kid!* There were no split ends.

Of course, that was not all.

Her uniform had been cut at her right side and left arm.

It was not torn. It was split, as if it had always been like that. And that was despite the Shihouin Academy uniform's anti-spell defenses.

…First Horinouchi and now her. Are they confusing stat allocation with judging the intent to kill!?

But dealing with the crazies is the police's job. Good luck, America.

So Hunter gave up on her back-stepping. She did move back, but she slid her feet back while on her toes.

"Ha."

She said it while in the upright stance of American karate.

"Bring it, rookie!"

Mary renewed her opinion of Hunter yet again.

Mary had a high Rank, but that was based on her grades up to this point. Both of them had fought lower Rankers a few times, but they had no experience battling those with similar Ranks.

Hunter had dropped to Rank 4, but that was not due to a lack of skill. She was solidly Rank 3 there. And from what Mary could see…

…She is incredibly nimble with incredible bursts of strength.

More than once now, she had kicked off Mary's body to dodge an attack. That was likely only meant for emergencies, but it took a lot of skill to do it on a moment's notice like that.

And now she prepared a combat pose.

…*Heh.*

It made Mary a little happy.

This had strayed from Mary’s initial plans, but Hunter was no longer saying “I’m done”.

Realizing someone was willing to be her opponent erased the “a little” from “a little happy”.

Mary was happy.

She had moved forward, swung her arm, and had it deflected, but she had used the motion of her other arm to spin around and…

“…!”

She moved forward again.

Hunter sped up her own rotation.

…*Spells!*

As she quickly exhaled, she applied the foothold spell and some bodily reinforcements. The battle was not giving her a gap long enough to even instantly summon her Normal Frame from her pool of accumulated ether, so she activated the spells in her “standard” state to do as much as she could. But…

“Ohhh!”

She was glad she practiced karate.

This opponent’s attacks were definitely based in sweeping motions.

When making a jab, she most likely activated a cutting spell on the inner edge of her hand’s tip. But once that jab extended far enough and she could sweep inwards with her arm, the cutting edge extended from her wrist to elbow.

It was a scythe.

It was more powerful when sweeping back as if in an embrace than when jabbing outwards.

It was a difficult spell to deal with.

Why would she make a spell that was more powerful and more likely to hit on the way back?

But Hunter’s close-range expertise as a karate user told her how annoying this technique was.

For one thing, she could not guard against it properly.

She could not intercept the jabbing tip and even her defenses would be sliced through once it began its “reaping” motion. The most she could do was knock the jab to the side with her guarding arms or make an attack of her own to knock the wrist or forearm away.

She could move right up to Mary, but then Mary’s arm would sweep in from behind her and it would all be over.

She might be able to get an attack of her own in, but then she would be sliced into as if by an embracing arm.

The difference in damage between their attacks was huge.

And, she continued.

…Her movements are all so perfect they piss me off!

When it looked like Mary’s long reach would almost mechanically rotate around her body, she would instead make a curving motion. It was like she had made her entire body into a whip.

Plus, even her straight-line attacks like the jabs began by swinging the arm behind her and then launching them up at high speed.

It began with her feet.

She would step with her feet, twist her hips, move her shoulder, and finally swing her arm. Hunter did the same thing, but Mary used her long reach to completely control her entire body and she could link any movement to an attack with her arms. Hunter could not take that lightly.

The acceleration of attacks made with the human body was determined by the number of acceleration points and the muscular strength controlling their reach. Everyone had the same number of joints, so it came down to the quantity and quality of muscles moving those joints.

If Mary could pull off the same speed as Hunter, her extra reach would raise the force behind the blows that much more.

And she was most likely doing just that.

Their speeds were nearly identical.

Hunter took quick steps and her strikes were…

…Oh, they're completely straight. Well, I am a karate user.

Her opponent would charge quickly forward and her strikes flew in curving arcs.

They clashed.

Hunter intercepted the surefire blade that Mary could freely send in from outside or straight ahead. She moved back and a squealing noise come from the soles of her shoes as she slid freely along the midair footholds her spell gave her.

"Hey!"

Ether light sparks scattered from the deflected point.

Mary was using a spell too. Just like Hunter, she had lost a chance to summon her Frame.

That made Hunter a little happy. It meant she was not completely at her opponent's mercy. Of course, that did not mean she completely understood Mary's attacks or that her uniform was not being sliced apart.

"That really isn't fair!"

She said it, even if it was a little late.

"Do those two interest you that much!?"

Mary felt happy as the scattering ether light sparks washed over her.

Her opponent had activated some spells even in this rushed battle with no openings.

This was the American representative. Under normal standards, she was the representative of the world’s greatest military force. That was who viewed Mary as a worthy opponent and was currently fighting her.

It was wonderful.

She decided to answer Hunter’s question, although not because of that.

“Yes,” she said. “I must have those two taking this seriously.”

“And so you’re challenging them to a fight!? What are you thinking!?”

“You don’t understand?” Mary had only one thing to say. “I am saying that waiting for allies is nothing more than naïveté.”

Those words brought an immediate change to Hunter’s expression.

Her eyes widened in surprise, but then her eyebrows rose to erase that look.

“——————!!”

Hunter gave up on intercepting.

She kicked off the air in front of Mary and leaped backwards.

…Is that…?

Mary was curious about the girl’s actions and the brief change to her expression. It had almost looked like the girl had been angered by her words.

“…”

Mary watched as Hunter created three footholds in midair and flipped backwards.

With some distance between them, she landed and resumed her fighting stance.

Her eyebrows were raised and her teeth bared.

“Come on out, Normal Frame!”

With a brief mechanical roar, witch clothing covered Hunter’s body.

When the completed shield spear appeared by her left arm, its tip had been repaired.

She held that weapon at the ready.

“Becoming Rank 2 doesn’t sound too bad!”

Mary smiled.

…She has excellent ether control.

She was entirely serious. A witch’s version of serious. Mary could sense her anger. And in this world, it was emotion that heated up a Phlogiston Heart.

Her anger made her into a witch.

That furious emotion was wonderful. If one raged and raged and raged, they could change the world. But…

…But!

Mary raised her voice as she charged forward.

“Ira! Summon!”

Hunter saw Mary summon her Frame. But…

“What!?”

The tall figure charging toward her wore black.

Each part was shaped like a crescent moon and yet had a solid presence. The black hat and black cloak had color running through them like red blood vessels.

…Executioner-style!!

That combat style was also known as Grim Reaper-style.

It had its origins in the Middle Ages, making it quite old. It predated the witch hunts. It was also associated with war and pestilence, so Hunter, who was raised in America, had never seen it before.

Mary held a triple scythe in her right hand. It looked like a gun at first because three similarly-shaped long scythes were lined up alongside each other and they seemed to extend the silhouette of Mary’s long arm even further.

But that was not all.

Hunter saw something behind Mary and it very much resembled the Device the girl held.

However, it was far larger and the long scythes were arranged in a circle as if to pierce the heavens.

“A Magino Device!?”

This is bad, thought Hunter.

The constant surprises brought by this opponent reminded her of something she had experienced quite recently. *Oh, she's just like that idiot Kagami.* Idiots who readily broke the rules could create shocked openings in normal people.

That was the case here.

…What is this!?

"You directly summoned the Magino Frame!? What happened to heating up your Phlogiston Heart!?"

"You don't get it?" asked Mary. "I am always serious."

…That's not an answer!!

Since Hunter still sort of understood what she meant, it likely had to do with the Phlogiston Heart.

That said, the enemy was already closing the distance between them. She may have ignored the Normal-to-Magino step, but Hunter could instantly summon hers too if she followed that step. So she corrected her stance.

"———"

She regulated her breathing, prepared to take a step back, and then noticed something.

…The ground behind me.

It was torn apart.

There was a meter wide gouge that continued for a few hundred meters.

Its depth varied from five meters to deep enough to see the ocean below the artificial island.

Hunter knew what had happened.

…A Magino Frame attack!!

Most likely, it had only missed because she had regulated her breathing before moving back. If she had immediately moved back, that would have been the end of it.

By the time she thought "not bad", Mary was already right in front of her.

Hunter had no ground to step on behind her, but…

"Foothold!"

As soon as she started her step, light dropped from the sky.

It was a Magino Frame secondary cannon and it fell between her and her enemy.

"…!"

It exploded and she was thrown into the air.

…I will not let you escape!

Mary did not hold back.

She knew this was when she had to settle the match.

She had created an opening by showing what she could do and she would not get an opening like this again. So…

"Here I go!"

She neatly guided the secondary cannon blast. Ira, her Magino Frame, had some weaknesses with this method of attack, but she was making up for those here. The impact sent her opponent into the air and the blast's scattered ether would interfere with the creation of any new spells, preventing the girl from using her foothold spell. But…

…Reach her!

Mary was acting under the same conditions.

That secondary cannon was meant for use on Magino Frames, so the scattering ether fragments would prevent her from using her anti-personnel spells as well.

However, she could use the ones meant for herself.

So she used an acceleration spell, caught up to her opponent without losing any momentum, and struck with her blade at close range.

"Macabre!"

She summoned her own servant into a spell circle. It was known as the Grim Reaper type, but she thought the yellow eyes inside the hood were full of emotion and quite cute. But for now…

"Divine protection!"

When she yelled that, the servant raised its scythe and placed an attack spell on her blade. And that blade was the executioner's scythe.

If the divine protection was placed on the blade itself, the scythe would act as the core and the scattering ether meant nothing. She could not fire it very far, but it was more than enough for a flesh-and-blood opponent.

And…

“Reach her!”

The high-speed strike reached the girl.

Mary felt clear tactile feedback as a physical blow that returned to her hands.

Hunter was working to control her foothold spell.

She could not get it active on the bottom of her feet in time. That was partially due to the secondary cannon having been fired there. So…

…My hands!

If she opened a foothold spell on each palm, even an idiot could push off of empty air. And she only needed a small push, so the ether disturbance did not matter.

However, she was worried about one thing.

…She’s fast and tall!

Mary had abnormal speed and reach.

Hunter suddenly realized that was two things she was worried about. Well, mistakes like that happened all the time.

Would those things let Mary reach her or could she avoid her?

“Ohhh!”

As soon as she decided it was a gamble, something shot in between the two of them.

At first it looked like a shield, but a closer look showed it was a sword. And…

“Kagami!”

Kagami blocked Mary’s attack with her Normal Frame.

Chapter 5

“If It’s Just for Fun”

You don’t have to say anything
Yet you even act on it

"Are you okay, Hunter!?"

As Kagami shouted back, she sensed something odd about her opponent's attack.

She had caught it on her blade. Or so she thought.

She felt and heard the impact, and she should have stopped the opponent.

But there was an odd slipping sensation coming through the large sword.

…What is this?

It felt like sticking a knife into a slab of meat and cutting it with a pulling motion. It was the charming sensation of the meat's elastic pressure trying to hold the knife in place inside it.

But if she was feeling that here…

"Kagami Kagami!"

Mary roared her name and raised her triple scythe.

That was when Kagami noticed something about the front armor of Dikaiosyne that could defend against Hunter's attack even in Normal mode.

…It was cut through!?

She could not see it from where she was, but she could sense the reduced internal pressure due to the split armor.

A spell circle appeared and Dikaio informed her of the emergency. That told her how far the blade had gone, but…

…What is this?

Mary’s scythe had indeed been stopped by the armor.

Dikaiosyne had been split by a power emitted by the scythe blades.

Three attack lines ran diagonally up and to the left like claw marks.

What if that spell had been fired as a projectile instead of emitted from the blades? In fact, most witches would be able to convert such a power into a projectile. In that case…

“It would seem luck is smiling my way, Mary!”

With that announcement, Kagami saw Mary’s back.

The girl had spun around after launching that full-power attack.

Her hand was reaching into the sky.

The scythe-like curves of her fingers were pointing toward the Magino Device with its giant nine ring arrangement that almost resembled a wind instrument. That weapon fired something in response.

“Kagami! A secondary cannon is coming!”

“I can see that for myself, Hunter!”

It was a direct attack.

Horinouchi spoke to herself.

“She said she was heading out to get Hunter, but she certainly is taking her time.”

As soon as she stepped out of the General Division dorm's front entrance, she saw a nine scythe Magino Device sticking up from the courtyard. She immediately spat out the iced coffee she was drinking from a cup.

"Wh-what in the world is that!?"

"Milady! That is Lady Mary Sue's Magino Device!"

"I know that, Koutarou!"

"Yes, but the thing is…!"

Just as Koutarou prepared to send her a further explanation…

"Heyyy! Horinouchi! We're in a battle!! At the ocean!"

She heard Hunter's yelling voice. So…

"U-um, milady!"

"Later, Koutarou! I'm heading to the pier!!"

The Head Maid saw the Head Butler punching the floor as alarms blared throughout the mansion.

The Ranker battle had begun so unexpectedly that U.A.H.J. within Shihouin Academy had been slow to react. The assessment of the situation, approvals, and evacuation requests were all running late and an alarm sounded from the residential area at the base of the mountain. But as for those here…

"You should have acted more quickly, Head Butler."

"Dammit…! I so wanted to provide commentary for Lady Mitsuru!"

“Head Butlerrrr. Can I send the data straight to Lady Mitsuru?”

“No, you may not!”

He shot to his feet and his car keys were already spinning around his finger.

“The battle is at the pier! I will hurry there, so send all information to me! And make sure Lady Mitsuru does not notice!”

“Head Butler.” The Head Maid pushed up her glasses. “There is something severely wrong with your mental health.”

Hunter flew through the air.

…*Wah!*

Her arms held onto Kagami in Normal Frame mode.

As soon as Kagami had been hit, Hunter had grabbed her from behind and leaped to the right.

That had shifted the blow a little, but it had not completely erased it.

They had been sent flying in a certain direction.

“This is right toward eastern Tokyo Bay!”

Her instruments said their initial speed had exceeded Mach 4. It had taken a short time for her body tuning divine protection to bring her back from a brief blackout, so once her vision had returned, it had looked like they were flying south of the secondary cannon’s direction.

But that was inaccurate.

Kagami had probably held Dikaiosyne diagonally, so the direct secondary cannon hit had sent them flying southeast into Tokyo Bay.

She could see their destination shimmering in the distance, but…

…That’s the abandoned industrial district on Tokyo Bay’s eastern coast!

“America’s tuning divine protections must be excellent indeed!”

As Kagami spoke within her arms, they began skidding along the ocean’s surface.

They were just like a stone skipping on the water. It felt more like ricocheting off a sticky wall than off of water.

“Wah!”

Their bodies rotated vertically at high speed.

Hunter wanted to use her foothold spell, but that would actually be dangerous with her feet alternating between the earth and sky so quickly. Even if Tokyo Bay was relatively shallow, their speed would convert the water’s mass into a powerful blow. Also…

“Here it comes!”

She looked up to the sky as she spun and saw several curves of light.

“It’s that secondary cannon!”

When Horinouchi ran out onto the pier, she saw a giant black scythe floating in the sky.

…This is the Rank 2’s Magino Device!

Scythes were arranged together into a circle. The black scythes varied in size with a single large one and two small ones forming a set. Three such sets were attached together.

As it floated, it produced a noise reminiscent of a heavy chain rattling. It was the sound of a chain in a spinning pulley.

“The tone of judgment as the condemned is hanged?”

“Head Maid! Lady Mitsuru just said something poetic!”

“That happens a lot with witches. You did that while you were students, didn’t you? Something about hellfire and dark freezing.”

“P-please stop that, Head Maid! That attack is super effective against me!”

“…Hey, where is the Head Butler?”

“Milady! Please come with me to safety!”

Horinouchi saw a car slipping along the pier as it tried to brake. It bore the red emblem of the Horinouchi family and Koutarou beckoned to her from the driver’s seat.

“Milady, this is already a Ranker battle! It is too dangerous here!”

“B-but I’m also the Rank 3.”

“No, this Ranker battle is between Lady Hunter in Rank 4 and Lady Mary in Rank 2. Lady Kagami may have joined in, but she will be treated as an intruder and there is a chance the outcome will have no influence on the original two’s Ranks.”

In that case, she thought.

“If I joined in too, it might be counted as a Ranker battle between Mary and us?”

“Yes. And even if you won, Lady Mary could protest the outcome because you joined as intruders! So…”

So…

“I do not know what Lady Mary wants, but if this becomes your Ranker battle, she will have an advantage whether she wins or loses! It would be best if you did not join in.”

“B-but then what do I do?”

“Please allow me to carry you to safety in this car! It contains level 2 ether concealment, so they will have difficulty detecting it!”

“My, that must have been expensive. How did you convince my family to pay for that!?”

“I was having difficulty finding any insurance that would accept me, so I paid for it myself!”

Horinouchi gave the car a closer look.

It had the Horinouchi family crest on the hood, but that meant…

“Did you paint it yourself?”

"Don't be ridiculous, milady! That is a sticker!"

"I'm watching this via satellite," cut in Hunter. "But is this what you call a corporate slave?"

"Hunter," replied Kagami. "In this case, he would technically be a shrine slave."

"S-stop that, you two! I don't need you saying everything I'm thinking!"

"Anyway, milady! You need to evacuate!"

Just as Koutarou pointed at the car, a secondary cannon shell fell right on top of it.

"Ahhhhh! I only just got that car three days ago!!"

Come to think of it, ether concealment isn't much use when it's plainly visible.

But more importantly…

"Kagami!"

More and more pillars of water rose from the ocean.

The two witches could not move freely after being blown away, but they managed to skid along the ocean's surface and randomly change their trajectory. Secondary cannon shells dropped into the ocean to pursue them.

"Their precise homing ability actually gives us a chance!"

Hunter was the one dealing with them.

Due to their speed and rotation, she could not just move at random. So…

…My foothold spell!

She created several footholds around her but did not use them. She just left them there.

The foothold spells would remain in place for a set period of time and they were made to endure the reaction of her step. They used a fair bit of power, so if their opponent's shells were pursuing the ether they detected…

"These will work as chaff!"

Her plan showed results almost immediately.

The shells began tearing into and devouring the foothold spell circles placed away from them.

Even so, a few of the shells still followed their proper target. And…

…Here it comes!

Hunter checked the live footage from an American surveillance satellite and saw Mary's Magino Device floating over Tokyo Bay in a shot from low to the south.

"Hunter! Can you send us flying at satellite speed?"

"Sorry! There isn't one overhead right now! Wait a little longer!"

"I think our opponent is the one who will refuse to wait around."

Sure enough, it was coming.

…The Magino Device!

Mary’s multi-scythe Device was aiming its nine points their way.

The secondary cannon shells were being fired from each of the scythes, but…

…Here it comes!

Even when a witch specialized in ground combat, their Magino Device’s flight speed would be at least Mach 3. There was a distance of less than ten kilometers between their position on the coast and Shihouin Academy in the center of the bay, so it would catch up almost instantly.

If possible, Hunter wanted to summon her Magino Device and put more distance between them, but…

“Kagami, until our spin dies down…”

“Oh, not to worry, Hunter.”

As soon as she said that, Kagami grabbed Hunter from the side.

“Eh?”

The world spun. A spell circle desperately worked to tune her inner ear and organs. She saw an incredibly familiar spell circle next to Kagami’s face.

“Y-you copied me!?”

“I started with a copy and further developed it on my own. That is a virtue for the Japanese, Hunter. Now look behind you.”

Since they were rotating, she could only assume “behind you” meant to the west.

The Magino Device there was scattering acceleration light behind it.

It was coming.

She had no idea what kind of range its main cannon had with that strange cutting power, but…

“It seems surprisingly focused on the closer ranges. The secondary cannons have poor homing and does this mean the main cannon cannot reach this far?”

As soon as Kagami said that, the ocean split to their right.

A straight line opened in the water for about two kilometers.

“Oh,” said Kagami. “She seems quite narrow-minded.”

“Can I be a little narrow-minded too!?”

“Save that for later, Hunter.”

The secondary cannon fired behind them, but the trajectory was different from the earlier homing ones.

“These will be guided! That one was for calibration!”

Kagami swung Dikaiosyne around and struck downwards with the back of the blade.

“Hunter, you were born on the West Coast, weren’t you?”

“Yes, I was…”

She had a feeling she knew where this was going, so she decided to ask.

“Kagami, have you ever done this before?”

“Leave it to me. …I saw plenty of people doing this when I visited Shonan.”

“Y-you’re the worst!”

As the barrage pursued them from behind, Kagami placed her feet on Dikaiosyne.

They were spinning through the air, but the five meter sword crashed into the water, maintained its orientation despite skidding, briefly cut deep into the water, and stopped all of the water that reached it. After that…

“I was right to create an acceleration system the other day.”

They cut through and across the ocean surface using the sword as a surfboard.

American U.A.H.F. received word that American Representative Hunter was taking part in a Ranker battle. As soon as they realized no satellite would make it to the swing-by point in time, they scrambled two F-23s from Atsugi.

They would be criticized if they took part in a witch’s Ranker battle, so…

“We have arrived! Just you wait, young lady! Marvel at our uselessness!”

“A man’s gotta make an immediate appearance when a witch is in a bind!”

The two planes on the apron switched the digital optical paint on their wings from a defense emblem to an acceleration emblem. Even including standby time, they took off quickly.

The first did not wait around for the second, but they both almost instantly broke the sound barrier and shot through the sky.

The spell circle opened on the HUD showed a busy sky. Various witches and organizations had set up security barriers to mark out their territory and the aircraft course schedule was visible for the air routes that witches from major organizations used. The two fighters avoided only the ones that would cause a collision and hurried to their destination.

In the sea off of the Uraga Channel, the Seventh Fleet was working with the JSDF’s Yokosuka Fleet to quickly grasp the entire situation.

They were also working with the Shinto Horinouchi family.

And at the center of it all…

“It’s creepy how we know next to nothing about the Rank 2.”

“That old hag from the Seventh Fleet’s Song Café is warning the Rank 2 with every communication method she can, but she’s being completely ignored. The Rank 2’s got to have some guts. …After all, she’s ignoring a warning from the world’s greatest military force, from Shinto, and from the witches.”

“Out of context, you would almost think we’re bullying her. …What’s the academy doing?”

“They’re viewing this as a Ranker battle for now and will intervene if it proves necessary.”

“Ha,” laughed the other. “Shihouin Cerisier of the Three Sages. Even if the Ranker system wasn’t as defined back then, she was the Number 2. She sure is nice to the current upper Rankers that are below what she once was.”

“I don’t get it… Oh, and I can see them! We’ll be able to see them for twelve seconds with our spell vision!”

The two fighters parted to the left and right.

“Don’t get close! We’re only gathering intel! Once we pass by, circle back around the bay and leave the rest to the photographer! They can be more use here than just snapping some pics of the moon!”

Hunter was swung around.

Kagami held her while surfing along the ocean with Dikaiosyne. And she was forcing them through slaloms as they went.

…Whoaaaaaaa!?

“Ha ha ha. Summer may be over, but these are the best waves this year!”

They skidded along the water. A secondary cannon shell landed below them, blasting them forward. Another shell targeted the spot where they would land, but…

“Hunter, swing your legs to the left!”

She did as she was told and they tilted down and to the right, allowing for a slalom to the right as soon as they landed. To ensure they did not move too far over, she swung her legs in the opposite direction to keep their balance. The ocean to their left exploded a moment later, but that no longer mattered to them. She was fairly certain the shell had grazed the tips of her toes, but she did not have the heart to check.

Two F-23s were flying through the sky, but she did not have time to look up at them. Mostly due to the dangerous person right next to her.

“I never knew surfing was so invigorating! I had my doubts when I saw those people shouting ‘cowabunga’ out on the summer waves, but I think I will be joining them next year, Hunter!”

You already are, you idiot.

Regardless, this was definitely more dangerous than the explosions. However, the idiot gave Hunter a cheerful look and performed a three-sixty to avoid a shell on their right. The shockwaves blasted even the ocean spray away.

“This is working pretty well, Hunter!”

“Just fly! Wouldn’t that be a hell of a lot easier!?”

“The sky may be open, but don’t you think that mean she is luring us there?”

Hunter realized she had experienced exactly that earlier.

Then a series of sounds arrived from behind. It was a barrage of secondary cannon blasts. However…

"Hold on! That's a full volley!"

"Not to worry, Hunter! We are already at the edge of Tokyo Bay!"

The bank was visible up ahead.

The map in her spell circle also showed them arriving at the eastern coast of Tokyo Bay.

"Why's it still called Tokyo Bay when it's in Chiba Prefecture?"

"You do not know, Hunter!? It was to create a laboratory to hold the mice and wild beasts with developed intelligence that were sent over from America!"

"Really!? Tokyo sure is full of awful people!"

"Indeed. Tokyoites and mice are both awful people, Hunter! Now, might I ask one thing?"

"Eh!? There's more!?"

"Yes." Kagami smiled. "As someone who has done this before, do you perhaps know how to stop this thing?"

Horinouchi opened the connection linked to in an email from the US military that said "This is secret, but please take it" in suspicious Romanized Japanese.

She sipped on her cup of iced coffee while sitting on top of the totaled red car.

"Why does this live feed show those two messing around?"

From a shallow southern perspective, the two of them were surfing and jumping up onto the slope of the bank. They crashed into an abandoned factory and broke right through it.

Horinouchi spat out her coffee and wiped her mouth with a handkerchief.

“Wh-what are they doing!?”

“Milady! I believe breaking through seventeen abandoned buildings in a row is a new world record, so should I spread this information online!?”

“Wait, Koutarou! That was nineteen and a half buildings! The information needs to be accurate!”

“Well done, milady!!”

So even abandoned buildings have materials inside, noted Kagami.

She was on a coastal factory’s transport platform. The corporation had likely sheltered their vehicles there before the Hexennacht ten years before. She and Hunter had crashed into and knocked aside the row of trucks, but that had cushioned them enough to stop them.

Regardless, their summer surfing had come to a physical end. But now she and Hunter sat on the concrete floor behind the smashed trucks.

“Ha ha ha! My, wasn’t that dangerous, Hunter!?”

“Yes! Yes, it was! Yes, it was was was!!”

Her vocabulary seemed to have dropped, so Kagami was worried she had hit her head too hard.

But then the girl sighed.

“Is something the matter, Hunter?”

Hunter smiled bitterly and looked over at Kagami.

“Yeah, sorry. I thought that girl would be more understanding than this!”

“I see,” was all Kagami could say as she adjusted her grip on Dikaiosyne. “Hunter, you fight with backup from America. I assume you fought on your own this time to match your opponent’s style, but you should avoid doing that in the future.”

“And what am I supposed to say to the idiot that matched my style and still won?”

“Why not praise her?”

Kagami stood up and faced the hole they had opened on the western side of the building.

…I can hear the American fighters.

If their opponent’s Magino Device was used at close range, it would move quietly. It may have been based on the idea of creeping up and chopping off the enemy’s head.

“Kagami.”

Hunter stood up next to her and swung both arms to release her Frame.

She once more wore her uniform that was cut in places and ether light scattered around her.

“I’ll return this to you.”

“Yes,” agreed Kagami.

There was one thing she had to say as she held her hand out to the scattering ether.

…My thanks.

But just as she prepared to do so, Hunter lifted the corners of her mouth and spoke.

“You should thank me.”

Her Phlogiston Heart was heating up inside its spell circle.

The speed of that process had just shot up, so…

“Of course.”

She stepped toward the destroyed opening showing the late-summer sunlight.

“Summon Magino Frame!”

Horinouchi ran from the pier to the artificial island.

She was headed west toward an artificial hill.

…That’s the only spot I can see the eastern coast from!

Alarm spell circles had popped up around the artificial island to provide information, but they were not informing people of the Ranker battle.

…Mary’s previous Magino Device attack split the island?

A long crack had been created from the center to the south.

The southern end was still connected, but the island rose and fell with the tides. The stress of that process might just break the island apart along that line.

The two fighters in the sky were making their second circle to gather intelligence.

Voices and metallic sounds were coming primarily from the western end of Shihouin Academy. The Special Equipment Division witches were often sent out to perform repairs, so they were out repairing the artificial island.

In that case, Horinouchi could only leave it to them. She had to hurry as well, but…

"I'll have to summon my Frame."

And…

"Koutarou!"

"What do you need?"

Koutarou drove up alongside her in a white light car, but…

"You had a spare car!?

She peeked inside and saw a maid in the passenger seat. She was a shooter-type from the Middle East and she raised a hand in greeting, so Horinouchi nodded back and gave Koutarou a warning.

"No destroying this one, okay?"

"I am aware of that."

"In that case," she began before getting to her instructions. "Gather information on Mary and track her location. I especially want to know her attack range and attack power. Focus on the spell information because the US military will be recording the physical reactions and speeds from the air. We can compare the two information sources afterwards, so gather the information you imagine they would be unable to. Can you do that?"

Meanwhile, she heard a rumbling from the east.

"Milady, that was…"

She knew what that ringing of a large bell meant. She did not even need to turn around.

"Kagami summoned her Magino Frame!?"

The witch in the passenger seat spoke up before Koutarou could.

"Milady, well done!"

Koutarou, is that really worth shaking your fist at her for?

The battlefield was located above Tokyo Bay.

A set of nine giant scythes and an incredibly long sword faced each other in the air while drifting in circles in an attempt to reach the other's side.

They were both five hundred meters long. They looked heavy and slow, but they were actually quite fast and trails of clouds formed as their various tips tore through the air.

Tokyo Bay was about twenty kilometers across, so when five hundred meter magic wands faced each other from a distance of ten kilometers, their movements ruled over the entire bay.

"Hey."

Along the coast from western Shinagawa to southern Yokohama, people closed the waterways among the alarms and strengthened the ley line defenses at the various shrines and temples.

"A wall of clouds is forming over Tokyo Bay!"

The two circling Magino Devices altered the weather after only two circuits.

The sunny late-summer afternoon was now covered in a vortex of clouds that looked like cumulonimbus clouds shredded horizontally. Those clouds were forming something like a torn dome.

Inside that, everyone looked up at and listened to the giant weapons that scattered ether light as they moved.

The black multi-scythe Magino Device produced the sounds of rattling chains.

The giant sword produced the ringing of large bells.

The two sounds would not blend together, and…

"Look!"

The muzzles of secondary cannons opened.

A battle was beginning.

Everyone who lived in this region knew the standard method witches used to fight: holding their opponent in place with secondary cannons in order to fire their main cannon. So if those secondary cannons were opening…

“A volley of secondary cannons is coming!” someone shouted.

Immediately, the sword’s blade opened wide and fired its main cannon.

“Oh, dear. Miss Kagami is quite the rule breaker.”

The headmaster placed a hand on her office’s windowsill and looked up into the sky.

“But Miss Mary is a very troublesome person. Just as much as you.”

Chapter 6

“Accept the Blame”

I’m mad, I’m mad, I’m mad
Even though it’s not a habit of mine

After reaching the coast, Hunter quickly prepared to construct her Normal Device for defense while visually confirming what had just happened.

Ten kilometers was not far for a Magino Frame.

After all, they were five hundred meters long.

From a human perspective, it was like having a shootout from a distance of about twenty meters.

At that mid-range they could not reach each other and they could flee if need be. That was why they used their secondary cannons to hold each other in place and then fired their main cannon. But…

“Don’t fire your main cannon right off the bat!”

Even for the Magino Device, the main cannon ate up a lot of power. It would prevent any acceleration needed immediately afterwards. After all, a Magino Device main cannon was meant to be used against the Black Witch. It was meant as a preemptive strike as she descended from the moon, so all the focus was on attack power.

Most Ranker battles were ended with the main cannon, but they could not fight with that alone. Most of the time, it would be avoided or, if the opponent had the resolve, defended against. But…

“…What?”

Hunter saw something strange.

Namely, *nothing*.

Kagami had fired her main cannon, a deafening noise had thundered out, and the clouds had been blasted away behind the great sword. And yet…

"It vanished?"

There was nothing between Mary and Kagami's Magino Devices. There was no light, no sound, no power, and not even any shell fragments. Also…

"Eh?"

Something else was not right: their positions.

There had been a distance of ten kilometers between them before, but now…

"Why are they right in front of each other!?"

Hunter saw the two Magino Devices approaching.

That was odd.

Before Kagami had fired, there had been a distance of ten kilometers between them. Yet now…

"They're within five kilometers!"

It would not have been that strange if Mary had been the one to move, but a closer look showed it was Kagami's position that had changed.

…What is this?

After imagining what had to have happened, she gasped.

"Kagami!"

She waved toward the fighter flying through the air and pointed toward Kagami.

“Be careful! ‘That’ isn’t it!”

Kagami took action before Hunter’s voice reached her.

…The shell was consumed!?

She had thought her opponent’s power was a cutting power, but…

“Indeed it is not ‘that’, Hunter-kun!”

At some point, Mary’s Magino Device had moved much closer. No…

…I’ve moved closer too!?

She could only assume the distance had been manipulated with.

That raised the question of “how”, but in that case…

“I see. So it is normally used for *this*.”

Kagami swung her Normal Device Dikaiosyne and pointed it toward her opponent.

“Fire all secondary cannons!”

Kagami laid Dikaiosyne down in the sky in front of her while it was in floating mode. The Normal Device was synchronized with the Magino Device and it controlled the firing of the various secondary cannons.

Several firing spell circles opened. The timing of the shots was set by the touch of her fingers. She similarly controlled the trajectory with the movement of her arm and then linked the Device's movements to her gaze.

"Cry out!"

Cannon fire burst from the Device as if she were playing a keyboard and directing an orchestra.

Currently, Dikaiosyne did not have that many secondary cannons, but they made up for that with their excellent precision guidance and tracking ability. That was likely thanks to it being based on the technology found in Horinouchi's Akerindou.

Even the secondary cannons were quite powerful and fast.

She used a wide section of the sky. The volley of guided and tracking shots gathered together into what amounted to a single shot.

The barrage of power told her opponent to aim for the gaps in time, gaps in position, and blind spots if she could.

If she was a witch, perhaps it would be an incantation that struck back.

"Fire."

With that word, she swung both arms, spun her Device around, and fired, fired, fired, fired until the entire atmosphere shook. She released as much power as she could and it flew forcefully through the sky. But…

"It did not reach her!?"

It vanished suddenly near Mary's Magino Device.

There was no noise and there were no fragments.

Every last shot and strike made from every angle imaginable was gone. They were not stopped and they did not scatter. They simply vanished vainly into thin air.

What was this? This opponent had a cutting power and secondary cannons, so what was this defense?

…Is there an invisible shield there!?

As Koutarou traveled to the north coast of Tokyo Bay, he viewed the battlefield from the side.

Kagami was to the east and Mary to the west and they had both begun firing their secondary cannons.

They were five kilometers apart, which was nearly close-range for Magino Devices.

The sky connecting them was filled with the beams of light from the cannons, but also countless defense spell shields, solid sounds, and scattering lights.

However, one portion of the exchange was entirely one-sided.

Mary had not activated any defense spells.

"Is she doing this undefended!?"

Desiring a battle with no defenses was a common tactic for masochistic or self-harming witches. The more they were injured, the more they could convert that into power and send it back at their opponent.

But the maid in the passenger seat muttered something.

"You can't see it, can you?"

After all…

"It really is invisible."

He had no idea what she meant, but he continued watching the exchange of attack and defense in the sky.

Kagami seemed to have the advantage as she performed both attack and defense while Mary appeared to be focused entirely on attack. But…

"Koutarou! Mary's Magino Device has not been hit at all!"

"Well observed, milady!"

He looked over to the maid in the passenger seat, gave a nasal laugh of triumph, and returned to his duties. She sent an email to the Head Maid in a spell circle, but he decided not to worry about it for the time being. And…

…If what Lady Mitsuru said is true…

He saw it with his telescopic spell.

The two Magino Devices were once more circling Tokyo Bay clockwise in order to take up positions against each other. The black multi-scythe one was not defending in the slightest, but…

"It isn't…reaching her?"

Kagami's secondary cannons were vanishing before they reached the black scythes.

No sound, light, or fragments remained. It was like a giant eraser was passing over them there.

“You can’t see it, can you?” said the maid in the passenger seat. “I fully sealed that away. And I was an Armor-style witch known as the Vulcan Powder Keg. It could erase and consume any barrage and even the distance between you and your opponent.”

Kagami realized her secondary cannons meant nothing against this opponent.

…*What is this?*

Every last shot would vanish before it reached her opponent.

She also recalled the very first shot, when she had fired Dikaiosyne’s main cannon.

“Was that the same as this!?”

The main cannon blast had been erased just like the secondary ones.

It was all being done by some invisible defensive power held by Mary’s Magino Device.

“Kagami!”

A transmission arrived from Horinouchi.

“Here she comes!”

Sure enough, the black scythes were accelerating her way.

She was approaching.

That Magino Device had an absolute defense and a cutting power that could slice an artificial island in two, and now it was flying straight toward her.

Is this all? thought Mary.

This opponent had defeated the Rank 4 and Rank 3 and she was a Holy Knight, so Mary had wondered how much she could do.

“But she can’t do a thing against my power!”

Then this is over, she thought while accelerating Magino Device Ira.

There was nothing to fear. Her opponent’s attacks could not reach her. If she charged straight in, it would work out somehow or another. So…

“Let’s go, Macabre!”

The grim reaper servant nodded on her shoulder.

“…!”

Macabre swung its scythe forward and Ira moved.

The executioner’s Magino Device was an outdated close-range model, but it could handle anyone when combined with Mary’s power. So…

“Prepare to sink, Kagami Kagami!”

She stared directly at her opponent and only had to move straight in.

She could not miss and her opponent had no way of hitting her, so she only had to go for it.

But a moment later, her telescopic spell showed Kagami doing something.

Kagami's Normal Device was floating out in front of her.

She was using that to control the secondary cannons and the Device, but unexpectedly…

"What?"

Kagami's right leg kicked the Normal Device toward Mary.

That Normal was controlling the Magino, so…

"…!?"

The Holy Knight's sword began an immediate charge. It flew in a straight line counterattack toward Mary.

"Oh, that idiot!"

When the maid in the passenger seat spoke up, Koutarou had to respond.

"Lady Kagami would not make a mistake!"

"Um, so you aren't going to deny the 'idiot' part?"

It was true he had thought much the same thing. But…

"Lady Kagami is not an idiot. …She is something else!"

"Um, sure…"

The maid nodded, so he decided to leave it at that. Still, it was obvious what Kagami was doing.

…Is she testing it out!?

Her secondary cannons and main cannon had been erased.

“Are you seeing what happens with the entire Magino Device, Kagami!?” asked Horinouchi inside the spell circle.

“You have such a discerning eye, milady!”

Koutarou’s shout was followed by a collision in the sky.

The two giant structures had approached on what amounted to a head-on collision course.

“Did it hit!?”

After hearing Koutarou’s shout from her spell circle, Horinouchi saw the answer as she used her Normal Frame to fly eastward along the northern end of Tokyo Bay.

Something had happened high enough in the sky that she had to look up to see it.

Two Magino Frames had collided.

They produced the ringing of a large church bell and the rattling of an iron chain. The former was Kagami’s Dikaio-whatever and the latter was Mary’s Magino Device. It looked like they hit head-on, and…

…Kagami’s Device was eaten into!?

Their angles were odd for a head-on collision. They were skewed diagonally.

And with a roar, the great sword suddenly accelerated forward.

It almost looked like a blade thrusting in and through the opponent.

“Did she break through!?”

“No!”

A voice reached her from a spell circle next to her face.

It came from Hunter on the east end of Tokyo Bay, southeast of Horinouchi.

The spell circle displayed the scene as Hunter saw it.

Something was visible in the sky.

“Ah…”

She could not believe her eyes.

…What does that mean!?

After the collision, the black multi-scythe was unscathed and Kagami’s sword…

“The front armor was stripped away diagonally!?”

The situation made no sense to Hunter either.

She knew Mary had made a counterattack when Kagami’s Dikai-whatever charged toward her.

But in an instant…

…Kagami dodged?

She must have sensed something and quickly moved the sword tip away from a direct collision with the scythe.

A moment later, a diagonal section of the blade was torn away from the front center to the starboard side.

It looked like it had been gouged out with a spoon, but something was not right. After all…

“There are no fragments or ether light!?”

What was this?

Hunter gave voice to her thoughts.

The enemy’s attack was not cutting or a projectile.

“This is annihilation!”

“Kagami!” shouted Horinouchi who must have been watching the midair movements from close by. “Get out of there!”

That was right. The collision had failed and Dikaio-whatever had a large chunk torn from it. Kagami needed to move away and recover her position. But even though the great sword’s thrusters were emitting light…

“Kagami!?”

She was not moving or responding, so Horinouchi shouted her name.

…Is Kagami focused on resisting?

Hunter did not know why, but Kagami could not move away. Mary’s Magino Device had torn into her own, but she was still being held there as if she were being strangled.

In that case, thought Hunter. There was only one possibility she could think of.

“Kagami! Do as I say!”

This was her only advice.

“Accelerate toward your opponent!”

When she heard Hunter’s words, Horinouchi looked up into the sky while soaring through the air.

And…

“Kagami!”

The image showed Kagami’s great sword fidgeting a bit in the sky as more and more of it was torn away at the point of contact.

…Move!

She then heard a sound.

It was the low ringing of a great bell. It began as one, but then grew to two and three as the light from Dikaio-whatever’s rear thrusters grew.

…Ah.

Once she realized what Kagami was doing, Horinouchi raised her voice.

“Do it, Kagami!”

In that instant, the large sword Magino Device fully opened its rear thrusters.

But that was not all.

The pommel-like shell creation section briefly opened just before the thrusters released their light.

"Fire!"

The main cannon had been torn apart along with the armor, but the thrusters were still functioning. So…

"If she fires a blank behind her, it will add to her acceleration!"

Bells rang and the great sword escaped the bonds of the scythe.

As the scythe rapidly swung around, the sword with damaged blade had not lost its will to fight.

They began a rapid rotation to take up the best position against each other and new clouds trailed after them in the sky.

And at the center of that rumbling, words were formed.

They came from a grim reaper.

Mary in her black witch outfit turned back toward Kagami who was also turning back toward her.

"It seems that wasn't enough."

She said more from there.

"But this is not enough to satisfy everyone's grudge."

"What?"

Horinouchi tilted her head as she landed on top of an abandoned building in the east.

She could see Tokyo Bay to the west from here. She could also see Hunter on the coast two kilometers to her left.

She looked to the two Magino Devices in the sky, but…

…Even if I start moving now, I can't catch up with them.

If she was going to do something, it had to be here, so she asked the question on her mind.

It was concerning what Mary had just said.

"Everyone's grudge?"

She opened a communication line to call for Kagami, but then she heard a voice.

It was not Hunter, Koutarou, or the headmaster's voice. She heard a noise that did not form any actual words. It was simply someone breathing in…

"————————"

And falling silent.

…Eh?

Had anything ever brought Kagami to silence before?

"Kagami!?"

…What does this mean?

Had Mary's words meant something to Kagami?

Those words had shocked Kagami.

…Everyone's grudge?

What did that mean? Her mind raced and reached a certain fact.

The human named Kagami Kagami was not from this world.

"Kagami!?"

Just as she cried out in order to clear away her anxiety, a great noise filled the sky.

The executioner's chain had finished turning around and it had gained a sudden burst of speed.

...That was fast!

The scythe seemed to leap at its opponent.

"Fight back, Kagami!"

Horinouchi saw it.

Kagami's Magino Device fired its secondary cannons while turning back toward the black multi-scythe.

But every one of those attacks was erased. The precision guided shots that had been so useful in the battle against Hunter were wholly annihilated before they reached the black scythe.

"Listen."

Someone spoke from the sky.

It was Mary. She moved straight in toward Kagami as she uttered a certain line.

It concerned Kagami's background and it was just what Horinouchi had feared.

"Did you never think there might already be a transfer student from another world?"

Kagami ordered Dikaiosyne to move back as it turned around.

…The power has dropped after that last shot.

The main cannon had been torn into. It was being repaired, but she did not know if those repairs would finish in time. She was more concerned about the ether spilling from there than the ability to fire. So to buy as much time as possible, she responded to her opponent as she made her retreating turn.

"Another world? You mean…?"

"Yes." Mary was clearly gaining ground. "My home, known as the Layered Circles World, was much like this planet. There was an army there that fought a god in order to stop a concrete phenomenon known as the Curtain of Destruction."

Hunter hit the side of her head after hearing Mary's explanation.

"Fantasy?"

"S-some of the European witches have backgrounds like that," argued Horinouchi.

But an army that fights a god?

"Crazy?"

"U-um, that would put us in the category of crazy too!"

But the voice in the sky laughed. She almost seemed to crawl toward Kagami, but she also accelerated to fill the gap.

"But partway through the conclusion, someone with incredible magical power appeared and was eventually promoted to the rank of brigadier general."

She spoke a name.

"Kagami Kagami, it was you. Although surnames in my home world can only be two syllables long, so you went by Kaga Mikagami instead."

"There you have it."

The headmaster held a pot with a single flower in it, but she set it down on the reception table.

"You were not an unprecedented case, Miss Kagami. That is why your acceptance went so smoothly. It was all thanks to the excellent student who set a valuable precedent."

Before, she had praised the flower in that pot.

"It seems flowers that scatter ether light much like this one grew in her homeland."

But…

"All of those must have been destroyed by the 'god' who was another form of the Black Witch."

That explains some things, realized Kagami.

She had seen the destruction of several worlds on the way here.

The one this girl going by Mary had mentioned had been the world before this one.

“That was a circular world divided into layers to create a single giant World Pillar.”

They had a shared image in their memories.

“Then you must be…”

The girl in black answered with her head lowered. She would be in range for a second clash before long.

“I am Reese, warrior of the May clan. Do you remember me? No, I suppose you wouldn’t.”

“The fantasy-ness…just keeps growing…”

“Y-you’re pretty weird yourself, Hunter!”

“Milady! You have them both beat!”

She had named herself.

“Ha.”

She had kept this hidden for a long while and she had never expected to reveal it to this girl of all people.

“No, you wouldn’t remember. After all…” She paused for a moment. “After all, just before our world was destroyed, you fled without even trying to fight!”

“Wait!”

Mary looked to Kagami. The great sword looked almost within arm’s reach now and the girl was holding her right palm out toward her.

“Please tell me! What happened…with the destruction of that world!?”

…You’re asking that now?

Anger accompanied that question in her mind.

But her heart was the polar opposite.

It was cold.

This was wonderful.

She had expected Kagami to shout in anger and provide an explosion of emotion.

Before summer break, when the Rank 4 had fallen to the north of Tokyo Bay and when the battle with the Rank 3 had been relayed to the school early in the morning, a certain thought had come to Mary.

…She must be here to become a target of my grudge.

This was anger. That emotion gathered up all of one’s resentment, misery, and frustration and then thrust them outward.

If she had a target for that, wouldn’t she be able to get rid of her own anger?

But that was not the case.

“Honestly…”

She could feel a tremor filling her entire body. She could tell her body temperature was dropping. She could not hold her eyes steady. This was not heatstroke. She had gotten plenty of water. But she kept thinking about so many unnecessary things.

…I want to distract myself from who I am now, don't I?

She understood that. She was trying to justify her anger by saying it was righteous. And she wanted to accept the mistaken idea that she only had to expel the ugly parts of herself.

She suddenly realized her expression was twisted.

"So you're from that world."

…No, not "that" world.

"That was *our* world."

She had seen what had become of her home. But that was not all.

"They left everything with me and then disappeared! I looked up to you and learned how to pool my magic power from you, so I was left with all the world's magic power and then everything except for me disappeared!"

Mary allowed herself this as she spoke.

She aimed at the great sword and at Kagami.

"…!"

She fired her main cannon while charging forward.

Kagami's mind went blank for a brief moment.

…Disappeared?

No, it was true that the world her sister had created had been destroyed. And just as Mary had said, she had escaped that world before it happened. But…

"Wait!"

There was something she had to say.

However…

…Is it too late!?

The rear scythe portion of Mary's Magino Device spread out.

She could not see it, but something was definitely being fired.

What was she supposed to do about this invisible attack?

If she simply dodged, she would be back where she started. But Mary clearly had the advantage and moving in close would only get her captured like before.

Then what do I do? she wondered until someone answered her.

"Kagami!"

A spell circle appeared in front of her. It was Horinouchi.

She held her Normal Device. She was not firing it, but the line of fire was displayed on the spell circle.

…So that is it!

Kagami nodded and gave motion to everything.

She set a destination for Dikaiosyne's turning while repairing the Magino Device.

“Charge to the point Manko showed me, Dikaiosyne!”

Hunter sensed it.

During the summer afternoon, a large chunk of the sky *vanished*.

It seemed to have been gouged away, but that may have been an illusion. However…

“Kagami! Regain control!”

The great sword was moving in response to the scythe’s attack.

The entire thing had slid to the side, avoiding the “gouging” and remaining unharmed.

…It didn’t hit!

That was thanks to Horinouchi.

She had most likely determined the direction of Mary’s attack. But how had she done that?

“How did you do that, milady!?”

“Even if we don’t know the path of the main cannon, it isn’t that hard to predict if you know where Kagami is and can read the orientation and slight movements of the Magino Frame. After all, it has to hit to be effective. Then I just had to determine Kagami’s exact position to send a spell circle that told her what direction the main cannon would fire in. The real problem was Kagami’s position, but…”

From the surface, she could not see Kagami on top of the Magino Device.

However, there was still a way of finding it.

Two fighters had passed by the airspace while coming almost too close to the battle.

“Representative Hunter! Did the three-point range-finding using us and the satellite come in handy!?”

It had come in way too handy. She used a telescopic spell to take a bunch of photos of Horinouchi and sent them over. Horinouchi was on top of a building, so this would give them some low angle shots they would never normally get.

“Wh-what are you doing!? Hey, stop that!”

…You’ve gotta pay for that help somehow. Is that what you call an offering? Well, it doesn’t really matter.

“Kagami!”

This was her chance.

“Go!”

Kagami made several movements in a row.

The two F-23s flying above Tokyo Bay saw her Magino Frame fire its main cannon as it passed by on their right.

“Did she finish repairing it!?”

“No, she’s forcing this!”

Ether light was leaking from halfway down the main cannon and light burst from the starboard side where such a large chunk had been torn away.

She fired, but that destroyed the main cannon. She could not fire it a second time.

Plus, the two Magino Devices were passing each other by, so this shot would not score a direct hit. However…

“So that’s what she’s after!”

Kagami’s main cannon shell flew as if to scrape along the port side of Mary’s Magino Device.

In an instant, the light was annihilated at its destination.

This was the black scythe Device’s defense.

Kagami had dodged her opponent’s annihilation main cannon and had her own main cannon devoured by her opponent’s defenses.

The enemy’s attack and defense had been canceled out. And if they had been neutralized…

“Go, Rank 3!”

She did.

The Holy Knight’s great sword scraped the unharmed port side of its blade against the grim reaper’s scythe as if locking blades together.

They were both moving forward, so ether light sparks scattered from the long point of contact as they passed by. And…

“You’re kidding right?”

The observer pilot saw the scene while turning away from Tokyo Bay.

As the five hundred meter blades locked together, the Holy Knight and the Executioner ran toward each other.

“The witches themselves are starting a swordfight!!”

Chapter 7

“But You Ran Away”

I forgot
Yet I remembered

The battlefield was the five hundred meters passing each other by.

Their footing was withdrawing using great acceleration.

But the two of them clashed on the edge.

The long blade and shaft of their Magino Devices were scraping together, a wave of ether light surged up several dozen meters, and they did not bother with any impudent little spells.

Under those conditions, they struck at each other with their Normal Devices.

All the while, they ran toward the rear of the Device they stood on.

A swordfight broke out where they met at the scraping edge.

Kagami swung Dikaiosyne and Mary raised Ira for a scraping blow.

Sparks of ether light scattered and deafening noises continued without end.

The grim reaper targeted the holy knight’s neck, torso, and arms. As the holy knight dodged and repelled those blows, she swung her blade down toward the grim reaper’s head.

But the grim reaper would turn the blow aside and turn to the side to dodge with the least possible movement. She did not lean back because that would have removed her from the scraping edge.

The holy knight did not fall back either.

They exchanged potentially lethal blows at equal range.

"Ohhh…"

And they accelerated.

"I ask you!"

Kagami raised her voice while swiftly spinning around after sending out her blade and deflecting an attack.

"I understand that your world was destroyed! But…is it true? Are the director and all the secretaries really gone…?"

"Yes."

Mary ducked down to avoid Kagami's back-hand strike.

She did so while running, but she placed a hand on the ground racing by below her and instantly spun her body to launch herself back to her feet, all while giving Kagami a sharp look.

"Everyone was. Everyone. …Even the marshal that always supported you despite the trouble you caused!"

The shout and the attack came from low down.

It was a vertical slash that used the motion of hopping back to her feet.

…Ohh!

This was the first time she had targeted Kagami from below during this high-speed exchange.

She had likely set this up. She had only attacked from the side so Kagami's eyes would grow accustomed to it and then she suddenly switched to a vertical attack. Also…

"They all smiled as they died! …And as they gave me their magic power!!"

The words stabbed into her from below.

"You abandoned everything and fled! It's time you paid for that great crime!!"

Mary gathered speed in her strike.

She had long arms and a tall body. She also used a flexible snap to provide even more speed to the long scythe.

Her opponent had just made a backhand swing of her sword, so her arms were almost fully spread to the sides, leaving her unable to move.

The triple scythe would slice her in three.

She only had to swing the blade up while making sure the tip moved fastest of all.

"————"

She hoped that it would hit, but she did not think it would. After all…

…I know this opponent!

I never once defeated her back in our world.

So…

…Reach her!

After that thought, she suddenly lost sight of the enemy before her eyes.

"What!?"

She had disappeared. No, that was not it.

The enemy had done something amid the scattering ether light of their Devices' locked blades.

"She canceled her Frame!?"

Kagami had a plan.

…There are a lot of Device fragments scattering around here.

That gave her plenty of supplies for a Normal Frame at least.

So she gave a shout to Dikaio in the spell circle on her shoulder.

"Dikaio! Time to change outfits!"

Oh, no, thought Mary.

This opponent's great "strength" in her world had been thanks to a certain ability.

…The free construction of ether!

She did not use the ceremonies and spells everyone else did.

She had the same power as the "god" that could make ether her own and play with it.

She was different from Mary.

When Mary had arrived in this world and learned about the techniques of "witches", she had felt oddly relieved that they were so similar to the techniques of her own world. She had lost everything, but this had acted as a replacement for that loss.

But this opponent had not changed.

No, she had gained more information. But when Mary had seen her using and fighting with a witch's Frame, she had forgotten something: this was a "god" merely acting like a witch.

After canceling her Frame, she was wearing a suit and floating in the air a bit.

But the momentum of swinging her sword remained in her body. She had been swinging a five meter sword, so with only the suit weighing her down, she spun back and to the right with enough speed to avoid Mary's attack.

"Kh…"

Mary raised her right arm while bending back.

The opponent in front of her opened her mouth while spinning.

"Summon Normal Frame!"

It was an act of parting.

The holy knight spun in midair while summoning her Frame and making a horizontal strike.

At the same time, the grim reaper gave a shout and thrust her backwards-leaning body toward the ground in front of her.

She no longer tried to run.

The holy knight's sword smashed two of the three scythes, but its own blade was severed diagonally.

Then the grim reaper's great stomp shook her own Magino Device.

"…!"

They both ducked low, but a valley appeared in the sky.

The two Magino Devices repelled each other and parted.

Kagami was repelled more strongly.

"Was she stronger because she followed my lead!?"

The wind whipped up as the two Magino Devices rapidly parted. Kagami saw Mary's Magino Device perform a quick rotation.

…That was fast!

The speed was blatantly abnormal. The turn looked like sped-up footage.

She had made a few actions like that before. Thinking of it like a short dash, it must have been possible for her when certain conditions were met. But…

"Defense spells!"

Kagami opened plenty of spell shields toward her opponent to use as cover.

However, they all *disappeared* and the sky came into view.

Mary's main cannon had instantly "reaped" her defenses.

"I did it!"

Mary gasped for breath with her right hand held forward.

Beyond the one surviving scythe, the giant sword had lost both its port and starboard sides. The central main cannon had already destroyed itself, so it lacked the attack power needed to defeat her.

In that case, she thought while standing up within the scattering ether light.

She raised her scythe again.

"Time to end this!"

Just as she looked to her opponent in the distance, Kagami was also looking her way.

Their eyes met. It seemed like a coincidental moment, but…

"———————"

Her opponent had not lost the will to fight.

Why not?

…Don't tell me…!

Her thoughts led her straight to the answer.

Just as two fighters flew through the sky, a single attack arrived.

“Horinouchi!”

That girl’s arrow rose from far below and tore into her, ignoring the Device’s movements and the cover it provided.

It was a direct hit.

Hunter whistled at the conclusion in the sky.

“Horinouchi, I thought you specialized in pure attack power, but it looks like I was wrong about you.”

“Oh? It took you this long to figure that out?”

“Yeah. …You specialize in shooting people.”

“I-isn’t that just twisting it in a different direction!?”

But in truth, that had been ridiculous. Even with assistance from America’s fighters and satellite, she had hit someone on a quickly-moving Magino Device when she could not see them.

And the path of the arrow had been crazy.

…Mary would’ve noticed if she fired it up into the air and had it drop down, so she had it practically crawl along the Magino Device’s upper surface.

That seemed like too broad an interpretation of “precision guided”.

Plus, it had been really fast. By the time Mary’s servant had detected it in the Device’s warning range, it must have been too late to dodge it.

…Horinouchi's too much of a crazy person to do it, but I bet she could use that to pull off sniper shots with a stealth spell active.

It was just like using the Hedgehog to fire from outside the enemy's range of vision. That was why one had to challenge a sniper to a head-on battle. That had been part of her thinking in the previous Ranker battle.

And now a parting had been accomplished in the sky.

While Dikai-whatever fell toward the southeast side of Tokyo Bay, the black scythe came apart in a mist of ether light.

They were both sinking, but their damage was different.

Kagami's Magino Device was practically destroyed, but Mary's was not. She had only lost the controlling Normal Device thanks to Kagami's attacks and Horinouchi's arrow.

She would be injured herself, but it really came down to the loss of control.

Of course, she could regain control and continue the fight, but…

"If she does that, I will be her opponent."

Horinouchi was untouched, so taking her on would be a poor decision. That may have been why the black multi-scythe descended beyond the clouds that trailed and scattered behind it.

She was leaving.

That would likely take her to Shihouin Academy in the end, but this was a Ranker battle. If she returned to the academy to reset everything, that would count as the conclusion. Also…

“Kagami!”

A bell rang over Hunter’s cry.

Kagami’s Magino Device had fallen into the abandoned buildings to the southeast.

Horinouchi ran over to the crash site and saw the fighters passing by overhead in a wide turn back toward Atsugi.

While silently thanking them, she knew she had to hurry.

“Kagami!”

Hunter had already sent word that she had found Kagami.

She knew where to go because it was where that giant Dikai-whatever had crashed. A blizzard of ether light was rising into the sky.

The moon was there.

If the Black Witch had seen that battle, what had she thought? That was a battle between her sister and the survivor of a world she had destroyed.

…Maybe this too is a part of the story she’s made.

Horinouchi’s feet came to a sudden stop.

Kagami was there.

She stood on the road in front of a smashed abandoned building. The summer afternoon sun warmed that broken asphalt where grass grew through the cracks.

Kagami wore her Normal Form with Hunter at her side in her school uniform.

“Horinouchi.”

But when she noticed Horinouchi, she canceled the witch outfit.

She took a light step and returned to her usual suit. And…

“————”

Horinouchi could say nothing as the girl sighed and relaxed, but the sound of the fighters tearing through the distant sky reached them.

Kagami opened her mouth, looked up into the sky, and placed a hand over her eyes.

“How could this happen?”

Something that reflected the sunlight dripped down from below her hand.

She was crying. Just as she had in the setting sun before, she cried below the hand blocking out the afternoon sun.

“The world brings such cruel karma.”

Horinouchi could only watch as Kagami shed her tears.

The unofficial Ranker battle had an incomplete ending.

From what Horinouchi heard, Mary had returned to Shihouin Academy after canceling her Device and had received quite a talking to from the headmaster about splitting the artificial island in two.

Meanwhile, Horinouchi and Hunter had collected exhausted Kagami and had a US Navy hovercraft take them back to the academy, but Kagami had seemed absentminded the entire time. Horinouchi had known she needed to snap the girl out of it, so she had shoved her into the gym's shared bath and forced her to take a break.

Kagami had visited the sauna after taking a long bath and then appeared in a new suit she had been storing somewhere. As soon as she saw Horinouchi, she had said the following:

"So. What shall we do now?"

That had seemed odd for someone who always made the first move, but she was likely still in shock over Mary's identity.

That was precisely when they had both received an email from the headmaster. It was of course a request for a rematch from Mary, and…

…Tomorrow afterschool? She sure is eager to get this over with.

Perhaps she wanted to do this before Kagami's mentality had a chance to recover. In that case…

"Fine. Let's make use of the time we have to prepare for tomorrow."

With that, Horinouchi took Hunter and Kagami (whose gait seemed a little weak) to her room.

Chapter 8

“To Where It Simply Is”

The smallest unit of currency these days
Is the double burger

Hunter thought about the concept of money.

But not so much as precious metals like gold. Gold was often used in magic, but it could be a pain since its quality dropped as it grew harder and bronze started to work better.

Her thoughts on money were centered on the currency economy.

“You sure can find a lot of it in some places…”

She looked around a hall. The square room had fifteen meter sides and a five meter high ceiling. There was a tiered platform in the back and there seemed to be an entrance at the top, but…

“Is this your private room, Horinouchi?”

“Yes, it’s the top floor of the General Division dorm. That said, I’m the first one to use it.”

“Really?”

“Yes.” Horinouchi nodded. “This dorm was originally part of the school Shihouin Academy was based on.”

“It was moved?”

“Yes. …That school was wiped out during the previous Hexennacht, but a few of the buildings survived. They were equipped with the most advanced spell defenses of the time and they were moved by eighty feng shui witches over three hours. That’s why this school is known as the One Night Castle. …Although since the school itself had been lost, I’m not sure how much the dorm’s defenses actually helped.”

"Well, if it survived, it's still a nice jinx for safety. …Witches do like to live in the houses that mysteriously survive landslides and things like that."

But a question did occur to Hunter.

"Why are you the first one to use this top floor room?"

"It's simple. There were never any standout Rankers from the General Division, so everyone refused to use it."

Horinouchi placed a hand on her cheek and sighed.

"There were even some witches who reached the single digit Ranks, but they still refused. They said they had to make it even higher. …This room is based on the one my mother used during her student days, so I think she would have wanted everyone to use it."

"I'm pretty sure that's exactly why no one wants to use it…"

Especially when her daughter was at the school. And if that daughter was climbing the Ranks, no one would want to use it. Hunter felt all the previous witches had agreed this was the Horinouchi castle.

…It's more like a safe house for the head of the Horinouchi family than it is a dorm room.

Then the door on top of the tiered platform opened and the glasses guy who had caused so much trouble during the summer training camp stepped out.

"Welcome to the room of Lady Mitsuru, head of the Horinouchi family."

He bowed, but Hunter was unsure what to do since Horinouchi was standing right next to her.

"It is time for dinner, so would you like to eat now?"

Koutarou looked to Hunter and then behind her.

Someone else stood there and Horinouchi looked back to call out to her.

"Kagami. It's time for our strategy meeting."

"Eh!?"

When she heard Hunter's shock, Horinouchi ignored her with a glare.

…This is no time to be eating!

After all, Kagami was being too quiet. That in and of itself was nice, but Horinouchi would have preferred a normal sort of quiet. *Fat chance of that,* she thought to herself, but she could always hope.

…She's been lost in thought this whole time and she won't be much help like this.

Kagami must have been exhausted after the battle over Tokyo Bay because she had fallen asleep on the way back, but she had been thinking ever since waking up.

Even when they had taken a bath, she had not noticed Horinouchi calling out to her.

Horinouchi knew why.

Mary Sue at Rank 2 was most likely a resident of a world that Kagami had seen destroyed. On top of that, they seemed to have had a teacher and student relationship.

“We need to come up with some countermeasures in this meeting.”

Without an excuse like that, Kagami would carry it all inside herself.

Everything here was a fictional world to her, but she was the sort to empathize with its residents even if they were now living outside the author’s control.

It was not that Horinouchi did not enjoy stories. She had even shed tears over fiction. There was that one story in Japanese class during elementary school…what was it called? That one where the man rescues the crane and the crane came to repay him. The husband was told not to peek when his wife was weaving her cloth, but he did and found out she was the crane. And when the crane prepared to leave in shame…

“ ‘Wait! I’m actually only attracted to birds! Please stay in your true form!’ And then the aroused man spread the crane’s legs and prepared to-…”

The very end had been so awful that she had cried. Their teacher had asked them if this was a happy ending or not and the class had been divided. The radical furries among the boys had gathered together to insist humans and animals should receive equal treatment and it had ultimately led to a class trial, but Horinouchi had to wonder what the Ministry of

Education, Culture, Sports, Science and Technology was thinking with that.

…I'm getting way off track here.

At any rate, she understood why Kagami felt depressed. She had likely seen destruction quite a few times in the past, but this may have been the first time a survivor had appeared before her.

…Honestly.

In her battles with them, Kagami had proven to be an insane adlibber who could adapt to just about any situation.

But if this was what happened when she was not used to something…

…Were her previous adlibs all things she had studied before?

Or…

…Can she only adlib when up against "others" like us but not when she's up against "herself" in the form of her emotions?

Which was it? But Horinouchi had a feeling she somehow understood this ever-troublesome person. So…

"We need as many countermeasures as we can get. This is undoubtedly a formidable foe."

"Oh?"

Headmaster Cerisier looked out the window as she cleaned up her office.

From here, she could see the courtyard woods, the Spell Division dorm and school building on the left, and the General Division school building and dorm past the woods.

It was still only eight in the evening, but…

“It looks like they’re really taking action.”

She snapped her fingers to turn off her office’s lights and peered out.

“It’s rare for the Spell Division building to still have its lights on at this hour.”

There was a smile in her voice, but she had more to say.

“And it’s also rare for the back lounge of the General Division dorm’s top floor to have its lights on now. …We used to chat and discuss our training there all the time. I wonder what those girls are using it for.”

Hunter felt “you sure can find a lot of it in some places” for the second time that day.

“Wait, wait, wait, wait. What’s with this carpet? I could sleep on it.”

…My home’s floors were all boards cut with an electric saw.

They had been used without much done to them, so she remembered them being stained with drips of barbecue sauce. For her, “home” brought a fairly spicy smell to mind. When a bully in her class had said her house smelled of salsa, she had yelled “It smells like mustard sauce!!” and punched the bully in the face. She and her father had stood in front of the principal and defended her actions because “Mustard makes for a better general-use sauce!”

…But I’ve started to think salsa is pretty good too, papa.

But anyway, the floor.

“The cleaning costs have got to be astronomical when you drip sauce on it…”

“Actually, Lady Hunter, we have stain-removal spells. Yes.”

The maids nodded in agreement with the glasses guy and Hunter recalled that the Shinto magic system was pretty obsessed with cleanliness. So…

“Oh, that must be nice… You can go nuts while eating and still keep everything looking nice.”

She got down on hands and knees and leaned down.

“It doesn’t even smell.”

“Wh-what are you doing, Hunter!?”

“Well.” She got up and looked around. “I’ve seen places like this in mafia movies. Y’know, the red carpeted lounge with a grand piano and a dedicated bar.”

“It’s from my mother’s time, so of course it seems dated.”

Hunter looked to the many lights on the ceiling and the side lights that illuminated the walls for ambiance.

“Talk about a wealth gap…”

“Um, well, my family has donated a lot of money to Shihouin Academy. And it helps that my mother and the headmaster were old friends. But don’t you have a nice room as a Ranker?”

“Well, in the Special Equipment Division, we bring heavy equipment like milling machines and winches into our rooms for our homework. Some of the true heroes bring in lathes, but those feel like they’re about to break through the floor.”

That was true and it gave a certain impression upon entering a Special Equipment Division Ranker’s room.

“It feels like a warehouse or parking lot…”

“I see.”

Horinouchi clapped her hands and a wall opened to allow a tiered platform and sofa set out.

“Is there any reason to not just have that out all the time?”

“I was told it’s normally stored away and only used for parties. That table set is enough for me, so I never really bring it out. But…”

Meanwhile, the maids moved behind the dedicated bar’s counter. They used spells to silently control the electric burners as they began preparing to cook.

The smell of melting butter was already filling the air.

…It’s a bit light for dinner, but I guess it’ll do.

Hunter saw Horinouchi looking toward the large window.

It faced south, so it gave a view of southern Tokyo Bay. From here, they could see the lights on the pier and coast of Shihouin

Academy’s artificial island, as well as the lights of the recovered areas primarily from Shinagawa to Yokohama on the western coast of Tokyo Bay.

The lights of trains were occasionally visible, but those had apparently been restored with the help of the Special Equipment Division about three years before.

Someone stood in front of the glass, looking at those lights.

“Kagami.”

Horinouchi gestured toward the sofa.

“I’d like to begin our meeting. If there’s anything you want to say, you can start.”

“Eh?”

Only after reacting in surprise did Kagami realize she was not herself.

…We cannot have that.

She was not her usual self. She also wondered if her usual self was her real self, but she was fine with that usual self. But despite thinking that, she was not maintaining that usual self.

In that case, the self she currently saw in herself was not her usual self. So…

“Going along with what you two are doing would be the right thing to do here.”

“I see you don’t change even when you’re depressed…”

Hunter was crouched down and having fun letting her fingers sink down into the carpet, but then she looked up at Kagami.

“What are you going to talk about first?”

“Good question.”

Horinouchi relaxed in front of her and she was glad the girl did not feel the need to put up her defenses. But she was having some difficulty with this topic, so she asked a question instead.

“What would you like to hear first?”

“How about The #2’s crazy story about some kind of fantasy world? Is that true?”

“Stop that,” said Horinouchi with a glare at Hunter, but it was too late.

…You are getting a little overprotective, Horinouchi.

However, watching the exchange between the two girls had improved her mood a little.

“Yes,” she admitted about Hunter’s question. “I have traveled through many worlds. They were all destroyed, but that was one of them.”

She added a “most likely” before continuing.

“It was the most recently destroyed world. It must have been. As you heard during the battle, I was there and I worked with the others there to fight a ‘god’.”

“Then,” asked Horinouchi. “When she said you fled before the end…?”

I had a feeling she would ask about that, thought Kagami. *Horinouchi is a sharp one.*

“That was not a lie.”

In other words…

“I did indeed flee from there.”

Kagami’s declaration left Horinouchi speechless.

After all, even if it had happened many times before…

…It means that world was destroyed.

It was not that she had not believed Kagami when she had said it before, but having a witness to back it up changed her image of it.

That meant the same could happen to this world and they would become more “witnesses”. Also…

…She fled from the previous world?

Questions like “why?” and “you aren’t serious, are you?” entered Horinouchi’s mind, but then she looked to Kagami.

“———”

Her shoulders relaxed when she saw the way Kagami was standing.

Kagami must have noticed the change because she tilted her head.

“What kind of reaction is that? Aren’t you going to criticize me and question me further?”

"What good are criticisms and questions against someone who is determined to say nothing no matter what I say?"

Yes. This girl strongly empathized with others, so most likely…

…She would accept any criticism I sent her way.

She would not oppose any kind of protest and she would accept it all in silence.

Needless to say, accepting people's protests would not bring back what had been destroyed. Nothing could be done, but that was exactly why she would accept those accusations. She felt that was the right of those who had been created and destroyed with no say in the matter.

…But that isn't the case.

As the world moved and the people developed over generations, it all left the god's control. Even if the god was responsible for the destruction, the people had had the right to fight it and to overcome it.

Any accusations over the destruction could be viewed as no more than complaints, but this girl would accept them. Because she had been unable to stop it as the other creator. So…

"What an awful sort of resolve."

But…

"I trust you enough to understand that."

Kagami did not react to Horinouchi's words.

Horinouchi had hoped she would say something to either support or reject those words, but she did not.

…I-I hate these awkward pauses.

And so she said more. She hoped she was not talking too much, but she felt this must be Kagami’s turn to listen. And…

“But…”

She added an admonition to her previous kind words.

“Kagami? You…most likely do have some form of obligation to that world, but you are one of us right now and we have a goal. Please don’t forget that.”

…Hunter, quit whistling.

But Kagami did smile a little. Horinouchi had a feeling Hunter had ruined the mood, but then the Suzaku whistled back from her shoulder and she had to wonder again if it was really a bird.

At any rate, Kagami sighed and looked back at Horinouchi.

“Yes. You have my thanks.”

This wasn’t something to thank me for, she thought, but when she tried to say it…

“——————”

Tears spilled from Kagami’s eyes as she smiled and nodded.

…Ah.

It was so sudden that Horinouchi’s heart reacted first and she could not respond properly.

Before she recovered from her confusion, Kagami raised her right palm toward her. Still smiling, Kagami lightly shook her head to throw off the tears.

“I think I will go buy us some drinks. You two start the meeting without me.”

“Lady Kagami! We have plenty of carbonated beverages at the bar!”

“Do you have Lingalia’s McCol Strong Milk sold in the courtyard?”

“I am so very sorry!”

“Head Butler…”

“Head Butler…”

“Keh.”

“Who just said ‘keh’!? You need to be less straightforward when you say it!”

“Head Butler. Was there a reasonfor that?”

“Ah. What were those gaps for!? And what do you mean be less straightforward!?”

“I will be back.”

Horinouchi watched as Kagami left with a quick wave. But…

“Ah, Kagami! The lock spell is-…”

“I am used to opening things.”

Without even looking back, she waved her fingers past the door to open it.

How did she do that? wondered Horinouchi, but then she remembered how so many things had “opened” when that girl had come to this world. It had to be the same as that.

But what were they to do now?

…I could chase after her.

But…

“…”

She decided not to. She felt like that would be getting too nosy, so she decided this was the most she could do.

Then Hunter spoke up from the floor.

“Why are you blushing?”

“N-no reason!”

Since this was the most she could do, she decided there could not be a reason.

Chapter 9

"It Isn't Enough"

With indelible memories
Clenched tightly in your grasp
Choose to whom you will pay

The courtyard is surprisingly loud this late at night, thought Kagami.

Summer must not have been quite over yet. Perhaps due to the thickness of the lingering heat, the cicadas were chirping around the lights even at night.

Cicadas, hm? she thought before changing it to, *Is this how my sister pictured the real world too?*

She looked up into the night sky and saw the moon, but that too was strange. She was standing on an artificial island that generated power using the tides, yet the moon was always overhead.

This truly was an imaginary world.

…And if I mess up here, it will be a destroyed world.

The only place where she could not hear the cicadas was where she could hear the night insects. They used their shrill musical chirping to make their presence all too obvious. As the somewhat chilly night air descended around her, Kagami saw the central clearing through the trees.

"A mausoleum, hm?"

There was a small white shrine atop a short hill. It had been mentioned in her tour of the school.

…The old school's victims of the previous Hexennacht have their graves underground there.

They were not placed on a hill with a view like the foreigner graveyard in Yokohama.

"Can you not bring yourself to place your view of life and death in a bright place, Shouko?"

As she walked further, she spotted something else.

There were four round plazas situated around the mausoleum in the cardinal directions. They each had benches and vending machines for drinks and snacks creating a slight focal point.

"Coin-operated acceleration-style prayer wheels? You did not have to put those here, Shouko."

She put a one hundred yen coin in one to try it out and it gave her as many pieces of popcorn as times it had spun.

…Corn seems somewhat out of place for Buddhism, but since it is curry flavor, is it supposed to be Indian? Not bad, Shouko.

Ho ho? And here we have the Vs. VIPs series of the Saint Masters card game. It has the "Fury of the Burning Stake…!" one, so do they also have the crucifixion one? Ho ho? And this is…oh! They even have this one… I am glad I stopped by here.

At any rate, she needed to get back to her original objective.

There were four drink vending machines and she stood in front of the Lingalia one.

"Oh?"

She started to put a coin in, but it took cards. *When did that happen?* she wondered, but then she realized the vending machines would have "opened" along with everything else when she appeared in this world. They must have been modified as a countermeasure against that.

“So you use your student ID to pay? But you would need to authorize it for payment, so mine would not work…”

Hers was only any good for proving her identity, so there was nothing she could do.

What do I do now? she wondered.

…If I return empty-handed, I will worry Horinouchi again.

She knew that much.

But then what do I do? she wondered again just as an arm in a black sleeve reached in from the side.

“This world prefers cards to coins because it helps preserve the public order and because the people transform and fly so much.”

It was Mary.

Mary had decided to remain on her guard.

She did not even need to imagine what would happen. This was her enemy. So she had decided put up her guard, say as little as possible, do what she had come here to do, and leave.

But she had been shocked to find the girl spinning the strange prayer wheel popcorn machine and wandering around inspecting the card game vending machines. Mary had wanted to avoid hiding (or what amounted to hiding) while she waited. She was not here as a challenger.

So she had reached in from behind and scanned her payment card. Once the spell circle opened, she confirmed it.

“How many do you need?”

Kagami answered without looking back.

“Four.”

“Don’t you mean three?”

“Koutarou has terrible taste.”

Kagami pressed four different buttons. And just as Mary thought she was done…

“One more.”

Mary could only spread her mouth horizontally when Kagami did not hesitate to add an extra drink.

“I see that part of you hasn’t changed, Brigadier General.”

“Yes, I always did have you buy me a drink after each futile attempt to defeat me in a sparring match.”

“You always bought an extra one, so there were rumors you had a boyfriend.”

“What was it that I always bought?”

“Milk.”

Oh, I see, she thought. It was fairly common in this world, but…

“So your boyfriend was a cat.”

“It was for me after my bath.”

“Thank you very much for solving that old mystery.”

Kagami stepped aside, so it was Mary’s turn.

She needed five drinks. Kagami glanced over at her after seeing what buttons she pressed.

"I thought I told you to quit drinking those carbonated ones."

"Those are for my friends."

"Oh, you have friends now?"

She kind of wanted to protest Kagami's tone of voice there, but she decided to think of it as the provocation of the enemy. So…

"Yes." She kept her heart calm. "I have so many more than I used to."

Only after saying it did she realize how heavy a line that was.

I can't believe this, thought Mary.

Force it down, she commanded the bottom of her gut. *These are my feelings.*

But she could not maintain her expression.

…I can't do this.

For the first time in a long while, she had recalled not the resentment and anger, but the nostalgic times from before that.

Yet in the past, she had told herself the present was the present and she could remember old times after her grudge had been dealt with.

"Brigadier General, you don't change, do you?"

"No, I do not. I have always had this baby face."

That comment was proof that she had not changed, so Mary ignored it. For some reason, Kagami was gesturing her over, but she refused to play along. They were enemies after all.

Besides, there was something else she had to say.

“Due to a distortion in space-time, four years have passed since I arrived here, but I believe it has actually been two hundred years.”

“I do not seem to age, perhaps because the worlds recognize me as their parent,” said Kagami. “But this world seems to be a little different.”

“In what way?”

“My sister definitely exists here as the Black Witch. She is not just as an embodiment of destruction. And…”

“And?”

“I have some comrades here. Also…”

Something unbearable filled Mary when she heard that.

The next thing she knew, she was speaking without looking Kagami in the eye.

“Please stop that.”

Kagami listened to the girl who now went by the name Mary.

“You call them comrades, Brigadier General, but you will still betray them and flee if something happens, won’t you?”

That is true, she thought.

She was only here because the previous world had been destroyed.

“Brigadier General.”

Kagami wondered what this could be about as Mary’s voice reached her.

She placed her drink cans in a plastic bag she pulled from her pocket and she turned her back.

“We can settle this in our match tomorrow night.”

Her footsteps were louder than the cicadas and the other summer insects.

Only the leaving girl’s words reached Kagami’s ears.

“I will punish you and take both our grudges to the Black Witch.”

Koutarou realized that Horinouchi could not relax inside the lounge.

Kagami was taking a long time to return and that had to be the reason.

…Lady Mitsuru really likes to help people out.

She had been very well educated, so she could do most things better than most and she had twice the average sense of responsibility.

Hunter had eaten a snack and fallen asleep on the sofa, so Horinouchi had prepared a blanket and placed it over the girl.

Of course, that was likely to fill her idle time while waiting for Kagami to return.

She would occasionally glance out the window, but that only gave her a view to the south. Kagami had gone to the courtyard on the north side of the building and the dorm entrance was in a blind spot from here, so that would not tell her anything.

Is she just that impatient? he wondered, but what could he do?

“Um, what are you all doing?”

A few maids were crouched down behind the bar counter. The European witch in the center had opened a ritual spell circle and they were all checking their smaller handheld spell circles.

“Please be quiet, Head Butler. We are acting as Lady Kagami’s indirect bodyguards.”

“Lady Hunter ran into trouble, so we intend to intervene if anything happens.”

“What is that look for, Head Butler?”

“…Did you never think about taking Lady Mitsuru’s feelings into account?”

“Her feelings and what benefits her most are two different things. Plus, doing it covertly is a lot more fun! Right!?”

That second explanation is the real one, he concluded just as one of them looked up.

“Head Butler, Lady Kagami is back!”

“Very good,” he replied before turning to Horinouchi. “Milady! Lady Kagami has returned!”

Horinouchi sat at the window-side table as she waited for Kagami to return to the lounge.

She stopped pretending to look out the window and acted like she had just noticed Kagami.

“Did you buy them?”

“I did. I see Hunter fell asleep.”

Kagami handed the cans to Koutarou and smiled a little.

“Did I keep you waiting?”

“If you think you did, then maybe you did.”

“You like letting others make decisions for you, don’t you?”

Kagami seemed to have recovered enough to say things like that. Horinouchi only had to nod and bring up the topic at hand. The maids moved from behind the bar counter with a light meal of toast with a fried egg on top and a mixture of blanched vegetables and cooked pork, but she set that aside for now.

“We know what Mary’s spell is.”

“You really do?”

She could answer “yes” because both the Horinouchi family and America’s U.A.H.F. had investigated it.

“She attacks by pulling in an annihilation spell.”

Koutarou stepped from behind the counter and began filling glasses with crushed ice at the side of their table. He also opened a spell circle and gave an explanation.

"As Lady Mitsuru instructed me, I recorded optical footage and had it analyzed."

The spell circle displayed that afternoon's battle over Tokyo Bay.

The five hundred meter black Magino Device shaped like multiple scythes was tearing into Kagami's Dikaio-whatever and negating all of its cannons.

"This is the process she uses to erase all of your secondary cannon blasts, Lady Kagami. …Rather than a reflection spell defense, she emits a gouging type of annihilation spell and then swings it inward."

"So it is a scythe."

"Precisely," confirmed Koutarou.

He then opened a new spell circle which displayed a large arrow moving from right to left.

"Lady Mary's attack is first fired as an invisible cannon with an annihilation power at the tip."

That was powerful enough on its own, but…

…The real attack is what happens next.

After flying straight forward, Mary's "blade" would swing back.

"This is when Lady Mary's attack 'returns'."

"And as it moves back, anything it touches counts as a 'hit', correct?"

"No."

Koutarou shook his head and looked to Horinouchi who nodded. Then he took a breath and continued.

“When Lady Mary attacks, everything in the range of its returning trajectory and everything within the entire area surrounded by that trajectory counts as a hit and is annihilated.”

“So,” said Koutarou. “Let us view this from above.”

The image on the spell circle vanished and then a straight white line extended from the bottom of the screen to the top.

“At this point, only the very tip will count as a hit. But…”

As he spoke, the tip of the line turned toward the bottom left.

“It turns around.”

This was the scythe swing. And in this line drawing of the phenomenon, something happened.

The white vertical line had appeared first and then the diagonal line had dropped down to the left from the top.

Then a third line appeared, horizontally connecting the tip of the diagonal line with the original vertical line.

The diagonal line continued growing from there. As it did, the triangle created from the diagonal, vertical, and horizontal lines grew in area.

“I see…”

The inside of that growing triangle was filled in with the same white as the lines.

A moment later, the diagonal line changed direction from diagonal left to diagonal right.

It was approaching the original location to close the loop. This created a giant triangle from the white area. Once the white line did reach its starting point, the filled-in triangle was vertically long and horizontally narrow on the left. This triangle diagram meant one thing.

“It acts as a piercing attack on the way out and the annihilation spell consumes everything at once on the way back.”

“Do you understand?”

Kagami saw Koutarou grab the window’s curtain as he spoke.

He started by half-closing the curtain.

“The return motion is a lot like closing a curtain toward the center. It is a wiping attack that connects the return path with the cannon’s starting point. It occurs at very high speed, so it looked to us like our defenses were simply being erased.”

“Having her do that from behind you would be very bad indeed.”

“Well, based on the footage from the battle, she even activates it while right in front of her opponent.”

What did that mean?

“So she has decent range without having to circle behind her opponent?”

"Yes, Lady Kagami. Didn't you fire your main cannon because you had picked up on that?"

That butler was a perceptive one, but he had more to say.

"According to the analysis Lady Hunter had done, this spell can perform spatial annihilation."

"You mean…?"

"During your battle, you were occasionally pulled in toward Lady Mary and she occasionally used some unexplained acceleration."

She remembered being pulled in by something and receiving that odd acceleration.

"Are you saying she tore into space itself and then sewed it back up?"

"Well done, milady. …It is likely based on a teleportation spell. It may have originally been a spatial fusing movement spell."

"Yes, it just might." Horinouchi then tilted her head. "But if it is cutting into space, wouldn't it be easier to have it scatter right in front of her? Why activate it at the distant reversal point?"

"Oh, I can answer that." Kagami took a breath and lightly swung her right hand. "She was taught long ago that annihilation spells are dangerous."

…Honestly, she has such a good memory.

Yes, that was a lesson Kagami had taught her. She had matched her lessons to the spells of that world.

"It is just like fireworks. They are a little too dangerous to let children hold them. …So I told her to activate them at some distant point if she was to use them."

"…Was she a good student?"

"A little too good a student, if you ask me."

Kagami breathed in and smelled something.

She smelled butter, pepper, meat, and the sweet aroma of steamy vegetable leaves and roots.

I must have been hungry, she belatedly realized.

"Lady Kagami, here is the McCol Strong Milk you requested."

She held up the glass Koutarou handed her and then gulped it all down.

…Oh.

It seemed to clear her throat for her. Her stomach quickly set to work and she felt her throat on down being pulled toward the bottom of her stomach, but it was probably about time for this. Her mood was beginning to recover.

There was food before her eyes. *How refreshing,* she thought. It was not that things had been stale before, but she had something to say as she saw Koutarou serve a glass to Horinouchi as well.

"The past is the past."

"But if it refuses to go away, you still need to turn back and deal with it, you know?"

"What about you?"

When she asked that, Horinouchi looked her in the eye but then quickly looked out the window.

“I have never had that problem.”

“Were you spoiled?”

“I prefer to say I was happy.”

“So you admit it.”

“I am proud of it. …Aren’t you proud of your justice?”

“Then how about I take your ham steak?”

“Ah,” said the maids behind the counter, but Horinouchi did not resist and Koutarou stopped the maids with a hand.

…Yes. That is how it must be, Koutarou.

After all, I provided the drinks.

Mary suddenly patted her pocket in front of the Spell Division building.

“Oh, no! I forgot to give the Brigadier General a bill! Now she’ll never pay me back…”

“You sure have cheered up,” commented Horinouchi with a sigh.

She saw Kagami starting on her third plate of food and began to wonder if she had worried in vain. Or rather, the girl was amazingly skilled at rotating the plate while operating her spoon or fork. The fact that she did it all silently made it even more impressive. It was like a hidden talent.

But as Horinouchi looked at the girl, Kagami suddenly spoke to her with a slight smile.

“You have my thanks.”

…F-for what!?

She kept that question unsaid. If she actually asked it, she would get an answer. If she got an answer, she was sure she would do more than just blush. *Yes, I would definitely scold her. After all, she is carrying too much of a burden on her own. Even if she is a self-styled god who suddenly appeared from another world.*

Koutarou must have sensed a gap in their conversation because he bowed and opened a new spell circle.

“How about you look over the final segment of today’s battle, milady, Lady Kagami?”

“Nnn,” groaned Hunter from across the room. “Something smells great…”

“Come on over here, Hunter.”

“Pulling an extra chair up to the side of a two-person table set? That’s a blatant birthday seat…”

She came over regardless. A plate came for her too. It had thick-cut ham steak and vegetables and a side of bread in a basket.

“I will take that.”

Kagami grabbed the bread before Hunter could. No one was surprised.

After Hunter took a drink of the glass prepared for her and gave a skeptical look, Koutarou continued speaking.

His large spell circle displayed the final stage of the day's battle. Kagami's Magino Device fired its main cannon and charged.

"This was the one successful part of Lady Kagami's battle."

"Because Mary didn't use that cannon that makes everything vanish?"

"Yes. Lady Kagami's final charge worked because she fired ahead of time and Lady Mary prioritized dealing with that. … Lady Kagami successfully used that opening to send her Magino Frame in, but Lady Mary will be ready for this next time."

The same method would not work again. And…

"She will likely realize we have figured out how her cannon works and have a variety of methods to deal with that."

Horinouchi had something to say about that fear.

And that was of course…

"I will take part from the beginning next time. That should increase our odds of victory."

After all, their opponent had not fought her yet, but she knew their opponent's techniques thanks to Kagami. So…

"I am counting on you."

She nodded at Kagami’s words.

…*Eh?*

But then she realized Hunter, Koutarou, and the maids were all staring at her.

“Wh-what are you looking at!? I’m not some kind of spectacle!”

“Well… You just have a way of really letting your reaction show.”

The fact that she pretended to look out the mirror to check her face in the reflection showed that she was fairly aware of that fact.

Chapter 10

“I Want To Deliver This”

I forgot hope somewhere
Yet I remember moving away from it

Mary wondered what to do about the bill for the drinks as she walked up the Spell Division building's wall.

The black building had no entrance on the surface. No, it technically did, but that was only for deliveries and for those who worked inside. It was not meant for the witches to use.

The Spell Division's entrance was on the roof.

In other words, any traditional witches were to arrive from the sky.

Mary was trained in flight spells, but she did not always feel like using them. When she went to buy drinks for her friends was one such time.

She wanted to walk.

So on the way back, she would walk up the school building's wall to reach the roof.

She could see the sky from there. It gave her a view of the moon overhead. The black building's roof, however, was filled with light.

The students were performing rituals and doing research with their spell circles.

A group constructing a spell for use in everyday life turned toward Mary to greet her. They worked with the school to develop the popular spells that could be used in normal households.

There were a lot of Rankers with Hexennacht approaching, but they had not forgotten their main role as witches.

…Magic in this world was a special technique used for the more troublesome aspects of everyday life.

Healing injuries, controlling or forecasting the weather, computing complicated calculations, and performing music or plays that influenced people’s emotions were all the realm of magic.

Mary had grown attached to this world as she learned of that aspect of its history.

In her home, everything had been a means of resisting the “god”. That had of course included everyday fire-starting and illumination spells, but those had only just barely been any help as their use had been limited to preserve fuel.

Her first impression upon reaching this world was that not everything was focused on the military.

The everyday was the foundation of this world and the military side had developed from that.

That was abnormal for her.

It had all seemed backwards.

She had not spoken their language and her clothes had been different, so she had assumed the people would drive her out as an outsider. But they had not. They had started by gesturing her to sit and then they had served her some food. She had later been told that they had decided she was not an enemy because she had been so well-behaved.

However, the police of this world were not part of the military and there was another organization situated above even the military.

To her surprise, that organization was a school.

By the time she had been taken in by U.A.H. and asked if she wished to join that school as an unregistered witch, she had learned how to use a translation spell.

Due to her skill, she had started off with a Rank in the double digits. She had chosen to join the Spell Division, but not because she had wanted to hone her magic. She had wanted to learn the history and workings of magic in this world.

This magic had developed from culture and civilization, not from the military and combat.

It had been persecuted and forgotten at times, but it had persisted and come to the forefront as a means of opposing the Black Witch.

By the time she had finally learned the language, she had come to love this world's magic.

She had learned her own spell system in order to fight yet they had been unable to stop the destruction, so there were honestly parts of that system she had hated. She had decided it was useless.

But this world used magic for something else.

At first, she had considered no longer fighting.

But at one point, she had visited a town called Yokohama. That was where she had appeared in this world.

At the time of her arrival, she had not known what the people there had said.

But during this second visit, some of them had remembered her and had shown her a spell circle displaying the old news of U.A.H. taking in a Ranker-class witch.

That was when she had been told why they had fed her when she had first appeared.

She had been thankful, but then they had asked her something.

“Are you going to fight as a Hexennacht Ranker?”

It had been a simple question.

Her answer had also been simple.

After all, this had been her answer:

“No. I have already lost.”

“I see,” they had all said. “If anything happens, come here. There’s a lot you can do.”

She had nodded, but shock had filled her on the way back.

These people had taken her in and treated her kindly, but she had just told them she could not protect them.

She felt that inability to protect them was the truth.

After all, the “god” of her home was only an imitation of this world’s Black Witch. The Brigadier General had said that “god” had only been the vestiges of the destructive power. She had been no match for that, so how was she supposed to stand up to the Black Witch?

But that was not it.

That was not the problem.

This world’s magic had not originally been created to protect.

But what about her?

She recalled the words of the person she had once wished to be like.

“Do not think about what it means to others. Think about what it means to you.”

That was exactly right. And that was why she had returned to the school without looking back even once and had started fighting in the Ranker battles.

Once she reached the single digits, a witch from Yokohama had told her the people there were rooting for her. And that was enough.

This place had shown her the endless possibilities available to her and she would do what she could for herself here.

And yet…

“Honestly…”

Someone truly troublesome had appeared and that person had a way of turning her back into the person she used to be.

She had wanted to go for a walk, but that was over now. She had arrived on the rooftop where the sky was so visible.

“Hey, Mary!”

Her friends were waving her way. She had told them about her situation, so she had no trouble speaking to them.

"I bought us some drinks."

Mary's friends took the cans and immediately opened them. They repaid her up front by exchanging the money and the can at the same time. Mary was fairly certain she had heard that that was a jinx for good luck.

She suddenly grew curious about the restored city in the Yokohama region.

It was hard to see from here with the General Division's dorm and school building in the way, but she could see the southwest coast of Tokyo Bay. Beyond the Uraga Channel, colors illuminated the sky from below.

The group inspecting a fire-starting spell turned her way.

"Mary, we're going to start a fire, so what do you want us to cook for you? A sweet potato or fish wrapped in foil?"

"You're doing that again…?"

Can't you take your research and development more seriously? she thought. But…

"We're working on an open-air spell this time, so this is a great way of testing it, Mary. It's for emergency use."

"Or rather, in my spell system, the open-air one is the original. This will smoke any offerings real good. My mom always used it on nights with a lot of dew."

"See? So let's eat, Mary. Tomorrow's your big day, right?"

"Eh?"

She could not keep up with the sudden change in topic and a group working on astronomical spells turned her way.

“You need to come on up further south, Mary. It’s a bad omen there.”

“If you’re down below again, tell us. We can make sure you get a ton of good-luck jinxes.”

“That’s right,” said a wind-reader witch. She poked her head out from the stairway up to the roof and began erecting a windsock. “That’s right, that’s right. …You’re always talking about that teacher of yours. Y’know, the Brigadier General you respect a little too much? That’s who you’re going to fight, isn’t it?”

“But…” Mary hung her head a little. “When she’s right in front of me…”

She could not do it. Her grudge always kicked in first.

But the others already knew that.

“There’s nothing wrong with a grudge.”

“Right, right. Dealing with grudges is a job for witches. You can either throw it out or try to fulfill it. You’ve decided what you want to do, so now you just have to do it. If any of it’s still with you afterwards, you can leave that to us.”

“My servant loves resentful words, so come to me if you can.”

“Now, now,” said a third-year manager who was recording the results of the various groups. “That person is still alive, isn’t she? Whether it’s a grudge or anything else, don’t reject your feelings as long as she’s alive.”

"That's right," said her friends who were illuminated by the fire-starting flames.

They all held up the drinks she had bought for them.

"A toast to pray for the victory of our Spell Division representative."

"Do your best."

"That's right."

She knew they were rooting for her.

"————"

She smiled. She did not audibly laugh, but she knew there had to be a smile on her lips.

This was the leading edge of witches. This magic was born from techniques made to live, something unthinkable in the world she had come from, but they still used these techniques to protect people.

Was she equal to all of them as they cheered her on?

Regardless, she was glad. And that happiness brought a smile. This was a time of joy for her, and not just resentment.

It was lovely.

All of them then looked to the two drink cans in her hands.

"Mary, why do you always buy an extra one?"

"Um, well…"

The night darkened as she answered.

She had to fight tomorrow. The day of reckoning was coming.

She saw lights on in the top floor of the General Division dorm.

They were preparing for that battle.

The battle was set to begin at nightfall.

That proposal was made by Mary, the higher Ranker. They attended morning and afternoon classes and then went to the designated location: the pier.

The artificial island's coast and the coast of Tokyo Bay were both lit. Mary had already summoned her Normal Frame as she viewed the distant lights of the Yokohama region.

Someone else was there to meet Kagami and Horinouchi when they arrived at the pier.

"Headmaster!"

The headmaster nodded and opened a few spell circles to approve the Ranker battle and receive the approval of the participants.

"Now, Ranks 2 and 3? Don't hold back in this battle, okay?"

As the witness, she swung her hand toward the night sky to signal the beginning of the Ranker battle.

At the same time, Kagami and Horinouchi used their Normal Frames to fly up into the sky with Mary.

They made no noise and left no motion on the surface.

The battle for Rank 2 had begun.

In the Horinouchi family's underground command center, Koutarou monitored Horinouchi and Kagami's positions while sitting in the commentator's seat.

"The battle has begun. Will Lady Mitsuru and Lady Kagami be able to take the Rank 2 spot away from Lady Mary? What are these three witches thinking as night begins and evening ends? Analysis will be provided by Lady Hunter who is currently with the Seventh Fleet."

"Head Butler, you are pissing me off, so can I beat you up?"

"And are you getting our data?" asked the girl on the spell circle that acted as the command center's main monitor.

It was Hunter who wore a track suit with the twilight in the background. The tower visible behind her was likely an aircraft carrier's bridge.

Hunter pointed at the structure behind her.

"All the data from our mainland is being gathered here and then sent to you. There's a decent time lag, but the Ranker battle rules only allow Horinouchi and Kagami to receive support from the Horinouchi family."

"That is true, Lady Hunter." Koutarou nodded. "The visual information from America's satellites and fighters will be extremely useful. The Horinouchi family will accept that data and supply it to those two ourselves. What is American U.A.H.F doing?"

“They’re following the three of them. They said it’s been awhile since there was so much excitement in their underground Yokota facility. And…”

Hunter opened a spell circle. It displayed a map of Kantou and three dots began to intersect at a certain place.

“The Chichibu Mountains of west Kantou!”

Chapter 11

“Rushing Thoughts”

Only those you have caught up to
Are in front of you

The battle shifted to the mountain range.

Mary had been the one to move out ahead and choose the location. Horinouchi pursued her while muting the Suzaku as it gave a war cry of acceleration on her shoulder.

“She’s surprisingly fast.”

“She was the candidate chosen to be the next generation ace for the magic system of an entire world. After the training she underwent in the Spell Division, I do not see how she could be inferior to us. But…”

“But?”

“She holds her arms forward like this when she flies because I taught her it was the polite thing to do.”

“You aren’t even doing that right now!!”

As soon as she said it, she wondered if that was the response Kagami wanted, but…

…Ah.

A warning suddenly appeared on her spell circle. The Suzaku was hopping around and creating spell circles in several different directions.

“The scythe is firing on us!”

Kagami saw Horinouchi immediately begin a counterattack.

Even Mary’s scythe was a spell that used ether. Due to the annihilation element, the attacks were invisible, but they could still be picked up using ether detection. But…

…That is quite a high level of annihilation!

Both the ether creating it and the remnants left after it was fired caused annihilation.

Thus this was a job for their spells and servants, not their own senses. As ether beings, servants could visually perceive ether information.

The Suzaku was moonwalking and performing swaybacks on Horinouchi’s shoulder to visually represent the path of the annihilation, so what is it really a bird? Regardless, Dikaio was trembling on Kagami’s shoulder as it detected the lines of annihilation.

That detection was Horinouchi’s spell.

Shinto was a system of purification and barrier spells, so it made clear distinctions between outsiders and insiders. That was normally limited to one’s field of vision, but she had put together a servant version of a spell for detecting “outsider” spells.

Such a spell would normally pick up all the spirits in the air and on the surface, so the spell was performing some level of selection. But…

“I am surprised even I can use your spell, Horinouchi.”

“Major systems like Shinto sell and distribute spells for the general public, you know? Those sometimes use local gods and my family has been the main creator of those spells during the recovery. Currently, the Spell Division and other places are systemizing the various branches of daily necessity spells.”

“Does that mean you would be able to use my spells?”

“Yes, I just have to present your spell as an ‘offering’.”

“I see.”

Kagami sent her a few.”

“Wh-what is this all of a sudden!?”

“Defense spells. I am worried about your thin armor.”

“Y-you know…”

They moved apart to avoid the annihilation and then they moved back together to avoid the next wave of annihilation.

“You can send me spells if you want, but I still have to worry about my Phlogiston Heart’s heat. I can’t just use them back to back. Overusing spells will only reduce their power. With your craft power, you can’t just use a bunch of spells at once, right? It’s the same.”

“We really did make an annoying world here.”

The Suzaku gave a muted screech from Horinouchi’s shoulder. The spell circle made it clear what had happened, but…

“The annihilation is growing in power!”

Horinouchi realized the triple beams of scythe-fire had raced by and were scraping back through the sky.

…It’s huge!

The tip she had avoided was not thick at all, but it was over thirty meters tall. And after racing about four kilometers behind her, it scraped back through the sky.

“Kh…!”

It moved back quickly. It was far faster than her own flight speed, but that may have been because it was a wave of annihilation.

It was just like how waves accelerated right at the shore.

But even if she avoided that, the leftover remnants of annihilation did not vanish. Touching them would cause damage, so they were like a trap. And…

“…!”

After the Suzaku’s warning, the triple shot fired a total of twelve beams.

And as more were added…

“The sky!”

As the sky passed twilight and approached the bluish black of night, it seemed to be “filled”.

A moment later, several dozen scythes reached her as rapid-fire shots.

The vast sky above the Chichibu Mountains in central Kantou was sliced apart vertically and horizontally.

Horinouchi focused on evasion.

She was not watching to see what would happen. One wrong move and she would run into this annihilation trap, but circling too far around would give Mary free time.

Moving in close was the best option for both offense and defense here. So…

“Suzaku!”

She unmuted the Suzaku to help it get excited.

“Yessssssssss!”

When she looked over in shock, the Suzaku averted its gaze and began chirping like a bird.

…*W-well, I might have misheard.*

“Horinouchi, that thing might very well be a parrot or a red myna.”

“It is the Suzaku! The Suzaku!”

Also…

“You evade too!”

Their evasion was based on spells.

The Suzaku and Dikaio could see a lot with their ether-detecting eyes, so they would look around and fire something into the safely empty space they saw.

“Horinouchi, these are guiding torii, aren’t they!?”

They were indeed torii. Kagami’s were blue and Horinouchi’s were red. Three of them were placed at fifty meter intervals.

Three more stages of three torii showed the directions beyond that, so their routes were drawn in the sky using a total of twelve each of the red and blue torii.

They followed them.

To surpass the invisible obstacles and avoid the erasing slash that pursued them, the blue and red witches passed through the torii in the sky. Sometimes they raced forward, sometimes they hopped upwards, and sometimes they spun around, dropped down, split to the left and right, or…

"…!"

Crossed paths.

Occasionally, the torii behind them would be sliced apart and shattered, but the shrine maiden and holy knight did not care. The torii displayed ahead of them would construct their route and keep them going.

However, the grim reaper up ahead did not allow them to safely avoid her attacks. Since the torii were appearing, she began firing her annihilation at those gates of passage themselves.

But they did not care.

The two witches accelerated and, if the torii was destroyed, they could actually see the slice. That allowed them to read the path of the annihilation spell, so they actually chose to fly in toward it.

"…!"

The shrine maiden’s armor was worn down and lines like claw marks ran down the holy knight’s sword.

But the two of them continued forward.

“Horinouchi!” shouted the holy knight. “The torii are too close! Put more space between them!”

The fifty meter distance was passed in about a second when they were flying at 80 kph, but the blue witch had a different idea.

“Set it to 120 meters, Horinouchi! Do you think you can keep up?”

The blue and red accelerated.

The black also accelerated, but there was only so much she could do while flying backwards.

So the grim reaper removed some of her weaponry. She slid the triple scythe blades open to reveal more of their internals than before.

And…

“…!”

Reddish purple ether light scattered from the internal structure as she sliced through the sky as much as possible.

A unit of four F-23s from Atsugi was tracking the three of them along with the surveillance satellite even higher in the sky. They saw it happen from about the same height as the battle.

“Hey…”

Western Kantou’s Chichibu Mountains covered central Kantou from the northwest to the southeast.

As they monitored the battle, they could see the mountain range continuing into the distance, but…

“A bombing!?”

From left to right, from north to south, the countless mountain peaks burst.

And that was not all. The mountainsides and mountain ridges wavered for a moment before finally being annihilated and blasting up in an explosion of dust.

The maps on their HUDs all showed the color red fill the mountain range from north to south.

It was already thirty kilometers long. The exchange of destruction spread from there and the leading edge flew through the night sky.

“That was close!” shouted Horinouchi while using almost all of her power on acceleration and control. “But…I see her!”

She was there, across the night sky. The black grim reaper was visible beyond the torii that now had seven stages.

The torii had 120 meters between them now.

And while they accelerated like that, their opponent had increased the range of her cutting.

The sky had been invisibly split and the earth had been rent apart.

They were still at an altitude of five kilometers, yet it had still reached the surface.

…Just how big of a scythe is this!?

No, Horinouchi's own arrows could reach that level. The problem was how much ether that this annihilation spell had to use up and how wide its effective range was.

This attack was not cannon-fire. It was an ultra-wide area attack spell.

Their opponent's ability to secure and pool ether clearly surpassed their own. It was possible Horinouchi, Kagami, and Hunter together could not match this girl.

She was still using her Normal Frame, yet her attack range and power likely exceeded the average Magino Frame.

But…

"Kechooooooooooh!"

Horinouchi accelerated with the Suzaku in top form.

A moment later, the air was sliced apart and the erasing power pursued her. She surpassed it all, dodged it, and continued forward. And…

"Horinouchi! The arc is larger at a distance. I will head in closer, so you…"

"Understood!"

They could see their opponent, so that left…

"Here goes!"

Mary realized a path to her had been made.

It was a path of blue torii.

She had messed up.

The red torii had briefly moved ahead and she had reacted to that.

She had three scythes in her Normal Frame and she had fired one of those at the red torii.

As soon it shattered, the blue torii appeared on the right.

It was too fast, it was a feint, and it was bait, so she waited.

Then another blue torii appeared on her left.

This was a feint too, but since they blocked her view, she fired her scythes such that they hit both.

A moment later, a torii appeared somewhere.

It appeared between the two shattered blue torii.

It overlapped the previous two and she would have been able to respond if she had displayed their destinations.

Her opponent had shifted from the left or right to the center. That small feint created hesitation.

Should she fire or not?

She briefly hesitated in that instant, but she fired in the end.

Immediately afterwards, she saw something.

There was a blue torii behind the fragments of the red torii she had destroyed earlier.

…Is that…?

That was the real one.

The blue torii in the center was a feint. She had been made to destroy the red torii first and tricked into thinking the blue ones were the true threat. And now…

“Are they both going to pass through the overlapped torii!?”

The blue torii had been placed just behind the red one.

The two witches accelerated from there and flew in toward her.

Mary saw Kagami forcibly slip below her annihilation spell scythe.

“Kh!”

She finally arrived right up next to Mary.

Her acceleration was perfect. She swung her great sword as if slamming her entire body forward and Mary blocked it with her triple scythe.

The impact added to Mary’s backwards acceleration, and…

“Does this mean things are different from yesterday!?”

"Are you the same as you were in those sparring matches, Reese?"

Kagami swung up her great sword and spoke while Mary controlled her speed, used their relative speed to throw a kick at her opponent, and used the recoil to accelerate.

"I learned how to be rude after arriving here!"

The annihilation scythe returned toward the target of her kick, but her opponent opened up her raised blade.

Kagami fired a blank.

She jumped directly overhead.

Just as Mary thought her opponent had dodged, the annihilation reached the spot the girl had just vacated.

Except it did not.

Just before the annihilation arrived, light shot in directly ahead of it.

The shrine maiden had fired an arrow.

Even the slightest mistake would have sent a swift shot into her partner, but…

…She didn't even hesitate to fire, did she!?

There was only one explanation as for how she could do that. Mary gulped and swept her scythe so it would hit the flying arrow and the overhead opponent.

The girl overhead immediately reacted.

She swung her body in midair and flew toward Mary as if slaloming. She swung her body to swing her great sword.

"I will not let you escape, Mary!"

Kagami wanted a clash with Mary.

It was a swordfight, but it was at extreme high speed. Rather than competing with footwork, they would fill their midair bodies with acceleration to slam their blades into their opponent.

They both tried to take the most advantageous position, turned back to defend, and yet continued accelerating northward.

To set the stage for victory, Kagami's blade struck in an attempt to destroy her opponent's stance and Mary tried to hit her with the annihilation spell.

She began an extreme close-range exchange with that scythe of annihilation.

Needless to say, she also fired when there was a gap in the swordfight.

She instantly sent the blast into the sky behind her.

The annihilation scythe tore into the armor on her arms and knees, but she had no intention of ceasing her charge and barrage.

…Please.

Kagami thought.

…Please tell me.

Please tell me everything about that lost world.

"Kagami!"

Horinouchi's voice rang out.

"You're pushing her back!"

She moves from attack to attack so quickly, gasped Mary.

Mary had the greater power and the greater ability, but her opponent was better when it came to technique such as chaining attacks together.

"Kh…"

No matter how many lethal attacks she sent out, her opponent would avoid them and approach for a further clash.

When she moved back and launched an attack from there, her opponent would dodge it truly by a hair's breadth and…

"The other one!"

The shrine maiden fired on her. Mary's high speed flight kept the shrine maiden from circling around to her blind spot, but it was still dangerous when she was focused on her main opponent.

…Incredible.

That thought came to mind, but she did not feel like erasing it.

Yes, this opponent was incredible.

Even in Mary's home, this girl had gathered comrades, helped them work together, and led them to many a victory over the "god's" army.

But even so…

“Why…?”

As their blades crossed and ether light scattered, she sent out her annihilation and continued her swift backwards movement.

“If you can do all this, why did you flee from our world!?”

Horinouchi heard the two ahead of her exchanging words as they deflected each other’s attacks and continued evading and moving.

…Mary?

At the leading edge of the solid noises, sprays of ether light, splitting of air and earth, and trailing tremors, Mary asked a question.

“Do you remember!? We all trusted you and thought you would save us!”

That was a world Horinouchi did not know.

It was most likely a created world that had existed separate of this one and then vanished.

And this world Mary spoke of…

…It was created by Kagami’s sister, wasn’t it?

In that case, the answer was obvious.

“Yes, I remember.”

Mary sent a kick toward Kagami’s words.

It was blocked by the great sword and a great rumbling rang out as the grim reaper leaped through the sky.

“You remember!?”

Then…

“Then why!? Why did you flee!?”

“Telling you will change nothing!”

That’s true, thought Horinouchi.

Even if Kagami had a reason, Mary would never accept it.

What if Kagami had been “right”?

Mary probably had not thought that far.

The fact that Kagami had fled was everything to her now and she based all her decisions on it.

“Then!” said Mary. “I will surpass you and leave everything of the past in the past!”

“Yes,” replied Kagami as she sent her great sword toward Mary’s shoulder. “That is the spirit!!”

A moment later, Mary held her scythe up to defend. The blade struck it and sparks flew.

…Here it comes!

Horinouchi shouted along with the two out ahead.

“Summon Magino Frame!”

Koutarou watched the footage from the surface sent by the shrines and temples affiliated with the Horinouchi family and the footage from the air and from orbit sent by American U.A.H.F.

The maid in charge of ether detection raised her voice.

“I’m picking up massive ether readings from all three! Their Magino Frames are coming!!”

They could not hear it, but a few of the maids muttered it to themselves.

“Clang, clang, clalang…”

That was the sound of Horinouchi’s Magino Device as it was summoned.

It was the ringing of a large shrine bell. Kagami’s was the ringing of a large church bell.

Mary’s summoning sounded like a clattering chain.

Those sounds would be filling the sky at the moment, and…

“The Magino Frames are in place!!”

The three great forms had appeared in the night sky, but there was something odd about it.

“H-huh?” said the maid checking the monitor and helping report on the situation. “That’s strange.”

The maid in charge of ether detection frantically stood up from her seat and said something else.

“They aren’t there?”

Yes. Even Koutarou doubted his own eyes at this sudden turn of events.

The spell circle acting as the command center's giant monitor displayed data from American U.A.H.F. and the Horinouchi Group, but the close-up view of the night sky did not show the three Magino Frames.

The sky was empty, which meant…

"Lady Mitsuru is missing!?"

Hunter understood the general idea, but it seemed too insane to have actually happened.

…The three Magino Devices vanished?

Several spell circles were appearing and disappearing around her on the deck. They were all observing and scanning the sky of western Kantou and they were all confirming that Kagami and the others were not there.

But Hunter thought something else had happened, so she raised her hand.

"Mainland group, use the surveillance satellites to search them out."

And…

"Don't use the ones moving in orbit. Focus on the ones in geostationary orbit!"

She could explain why right here and now.

She knew what had happened.

"The Rank 2 changed the battlefield! This was the movement spell that uses the pull of her annihilation spell. They're probably in two different places! Kagami and the Rank 2 will be in one and Horinouchi will be in the other!"

"Found them, Hunter!"

The second-in-command witch shouted from within the ship with the bridge in the background.

"Where!?"

The answer was an extremely simple one.

"The opposite poles! They're in the airspace above the North and South Poles!!"

Meaning…

"The Rank 2 tore into space and sent them halfway around the globe!"

Chapter 12

"But I Move Away"

Because I only move somewhat away
I can't say goodbye
Because I've always been alone
I can't say goodbye

Horinouchi felt cold.

…Where am I?

With that question in her heart, her eyes sensed darkness.

She had blacked out. The annihilation scythe of Mary’s Magino Device had cut into space. That cut had trapped her and blown her away.

Akerindou had altered its path to avoid the scythe blade, but the movement had been much like an instantaneous spatial leap and it had apparently put a great amount of stress on her health management divine protections. She was conscious, but…

“Kh…”

She got up.

There was a floor there. She was on top of Akerindou’s radome, which was her usual spot, but…

“Ah.”

Something was wrong with her inner ear because she lost her balance and collapsed to the side.

This isn’t good, she thought, but there were no warnings of an enemy attack or ether readings. Then she saw something beyond Akerindou’s floor and the emergency enhancement spell circle for her health management divine protections.

It was the night sky. She saw the moon there. She saw the Black Witch’s home.

But something was wrong with the sky around it. It was definitely night, but the darkness was oddly thick. And…

“Nn…”

She got up as if crawling and saw something down below.

“White?”

She thought it was the clouds. She thought a sea of clouds was flowing swiftly below Akerindou like a white fog.

But she was wrong.

One of the spell circles around her told her the answer. It gave the temperature.

…Negative thirty-two!?

That can’t be, she thought. It was the end of summer and positive thirty-two would make sense, so why was it negative? Besides, wasn’t the negative thirties when you could start hammering nails with a banana?

“Why am I bringing up that banana?”

On her shoulder, the Suzaku responded by spitting loudly away from her, so was it really a bird?

But she more or less understood. The health management had seemed delayed because it had been dealing with the surrounding temperature first.

Her health was quickly returning. She shook her head and the scenery came into focus. She could now tell what those white clouds below Akerindou were.

“A great blizzard covering the surface!?”

"Milady!"

Someone shouted from a spell circle. It was Koutarou.

"We know where you are! You are at southern latitude 90! You are above the South Pole!"

…She really got them there!

Hunter clicked her tongue and brushed up her bangs.

"She was stretching out her annihilation scythe during the whole battle!"

The Rank 2 had likely sent out an annihilation in the early stages of the battle and let it continue flying without swinging it back. She must have sent it out and accelerated it while it was as thin as a hair.

Then when the other two had gotten close and summoned their Magino Frames, she had swung the annihilation.

It had torn into space itself, sent her and Kagami far to the north, and sent Horinouchi far to the south.

Part of Hunter had trouble believing that was possible, but she could fire her own shells that far. To intercept the Black Witch's descent from the moon, one needed as long a range as possible and anyone in the single digit Ranks would have a way of doing that.

The Rank 2's annihilation had just shown a hint of that. No matter where the Black Witch descended to the earth, that annihilation could reach her.

"Just how much power does she have?"

Hunter was honestly disturbed by that. After all…

"If she could ignore the attenuation of the scythe, she could split the earth in two."

She had sent Horinouchi and Kagami to opposite poles, so her annihilation had stretched to a half-circumference of the earth, which was even longer than the diameter.

…That's pretty great!

If Hunter was still Rank 3, how would she have taken on this opponent?

Would she fire from afar or charge in close? One point of consideration was the Rank 2's lack of backup such as American U.A.H.F. or the Horinouchi Group. That meant Hunter would have had an advantage by knowing her location, but…

"In that case, she might set up a net of annihilation over the earth."

She started wondering how many scythes the Rank 2 had, but…

"Hunter! We spotted a red bird!"

She checked the spell circle by her hand and indeed saw a vermilion bird in the air above the wide area of terrain called the South Pole. Based on the display information, it was footage from the geostationary satellite over the South Pole.

That was Horinouchi, but…

“Have you still not spotted the North Pole ones!?”

“All three geostationary satellites over the North Pole were lost! We’re moving in the nearby ones!”

The Rank 2 had really gotten them. The way those two could easily detect satellites in orbit was a real problem.

But in that case, Mary’s intent was obvious.

“She’s pretty blatantly trying to split up Kagami and Horinouchi!”

Based on Hunter’s own experience, those two’s strength came from the buddy system. Horinouchi was entirely focused on long-range attack power and Kagami handled the close- and mid-range attack and defense, so they shared the roles quite well.

…They’re like an energetic hound and hunter.

That made Hunter think of her own family name, but even if the Hedgehog played both those roles, it had lost to those two in battle.

Those two might just be the strongest.

But to put it another way, they were not the strongest on their own.

And Kagami was most likely fighting Mary after being captured by her.

…What do we do!?

The two partners had been sent to opposite ends of the planet.

Their fastest method of travel would be the swing-by system, but that still took over forty minutes to move halfway around the planet. The North Pole battle would likely be over by then and Mary would have had plenty of time to recover.

Besides, American U.A.H.F. could not directly support those two.

“Dammit!”

But then…

“Representative Hunter! We have managed to observe the North Pole from a shallow position! As for the two witches…”

After a pause to check, the report immediately continued.

“They’re already fighting! …The atmosphere over the North Pole has split!”

In the ceiling-less dome of clouds at the bottom of the bright night, Kagami began fighting a girl bearing the colors of the grim reaper.

She could imagine how they had gotten here and why Horinouchi was not with them.

…Was it that spatial leap using the annihilation!?

It technically used great speed, but it was nearly a means of teleportation.

Unlike Hunter’s swing-by system, it could take her wherever she wanted, but since the starting point and ending point were bound together, she probably could not stop partway through.

…But it can cover half of the earth’s circumference!?

They were currently flying in circles with the front of their Devices pointed at each other

Kagami was firing her secondary cannons, but the shots did not reach.

Mary’s Device was a close-range type. It was a scythe, but that meant it had decent reach. It could reach farther than Kagami’s great sword.

But the current age focused on cannon-fire, so did that difference in reach even matter?

That was likely why the Holy Knight-style and Executioner-style had vanished.

The girl going by the name Mary would not have known that.

When she had entered this world and taken on her witch’s form, the world had given her the traits that suited her.

Namely, the executioner.

Who was that execution for?

“…Kh.”

Kagami fired, but the shots did not reach.

The outdated executioner had a long reach and almost no actual armor. With the cloak wrapped around her, she could not move around with much speed.

But this world had given her those traits.

It had given those traits to the girl with the annihilation spell.

The reach that outdid a sword could now extend almost endlessly and she could erase any attacks instead of using armor. And instead of moving around normally, she could tear into space itself and send herself flying.

This world had given her an appropriate form.

Kagami continued firing, but the shots did not reach.

Kagami alone was worn down. So…

“I suppose I should be thorough.”

She made up her mind and thought, *What is wrong with that?*

“The bond between teacher and student should not be broken. No matter what the student might think, the teacher can have her own thoughts. Plus, you have not actually gone against our mutual understanding.”

In other words…

“You have not taken the Black Witch’s side, have you?”

Mary put up her defenses when she heard her “teacher’s” voice for the first time in so long.

That was exactly right. She was trying to defeat her teacher, but that did not mean she was on the Black Witch’s side. In fact…

“I prepared this confrontation because I do not think you are fit to stand on the battlefront against the Black Witch.”

“I see. …And you feel differently about Horinouchi?”

"Yes." Mary nodded. "Once I defeat you, I will call off this Ranker battle. …I have decided Horinouchi's power as the Rank 3 will be useful on Hexennacht, but she will not oppose me on her own. That is my purpose here. To eliminate you from Hexennacht. …After all, if we place our hopes in you, a hole is bound to open. You will run away, betray us, and transform our hope into despair. I cannot allow someone like that on the battlefront."

And…

"I am the only one that knows that, so I am the only one that can stop you. Only I have the justification needed to do so."

She stopped speaking there.

She only needed to raise her hand and increase the range of her secondary cannons.

"I have already built up my willpower."

She tore at the world.

"Words are only needed to defeat or to build one's willpower. So…"

She moved forward. She advanced to defeat the opponent she needed to defeat.

"Hit her with your anger, Ira."

"That's why she did this…?"

Horinouchi gasped at the words from the North Pole battle that were sent from American U.A.H.F. to Hunter, from Hunter to Koutarou, and from Koutarou to her.

…This Ranker battle was meant to eliminate Kagami?

Mary had a reason.

Kagami had betrayed her and not opposed the destruction of her world.

As a result, she did not trust Kagami concerning the coming Hexennacht. She was afraid Kagami would flee at a critical moment and leave a hole in the front line.

To her, eliminating Kagami would eliminate a portion of their fighting force while also eliminating that fear.

To everyone else, Kagami was a great addition to their fighting force. Even the headmaster accepted that.

It would likely be concluded that eliminating Kagami was unrealistic.

And that was likely why Mary had decided to deal with her fear as a personal grudge. Because she had a proper reason to eliminate Kagami.

So, but, even so…

“You can’t do that.”

Perhaps Horinouchi was naïve, perhaps she needed to be more heartless when it came to a battle with the fate of the world hanging in the balance, and perhaps she was being blinded by the presence of such an intense partner. But…

"You can't do that."

She spoke the words that came to mind.

"What value is there in a world where personal grudges can influence destiny?"

In the setting sun, the witch who had been involved in the creation of this world had shed tears over the death of a single person.

If this world was a collection of such things…

"It can accept a personal grudge with nothing more than a single tear."

Yes, she thought. *Let's do something about this.*

So…

"Koutarou!"

She raised her voice. The spell circle footage from the North Pole showed the battle had already begun. Something white covered the sky like a dome. Was it clouds, or…

…The annihilation?

It did not matter. What she had to do was hope.

"I need to hurry back to Kagami! I need to decide how to do that, so send me all the data you have!"

The maids celebrated, but Koutarou simply nodded.

"Everyone, work quickly to grasp the situation. Use every spell, sense, and piece of knowledge you have to guide Lady Mitsuru toward a way to reach Lady Kagami."

"What about you, Head Butler? Are you not going to do anything?"

"No," he replied. "My job is the very last one. …And that means I have to wait for all of you, so hurry!"

As soon as he spoke, the maid relaying the transmissions from America turned his way.

"The audio and video footage from Lady Kagami has been cut off! The Rank 2's annihilation has surrounded the battlefield like a barrier!"

Kagami had the following thought about Mary's plan:

…Not only is she keeping me from escaping, but she can bring these walls together to finish this if she needs to.

Annihilation scythes were racing around and creating the walls of a dome about sixty kilometers across.

She was repeatedly firing and managing the annihilation. That cut Kagami off from the outside, and…

"…Toh!"

As Kagami fired her secondary cannons and had Dikaiosyne quickly sink down, the scythes creating the surrounding walls were pulled back to Mary's Device. That power was invisible, but its strength and range could be seen with the perception spell used through Dikaio.

The blades were thirty kilometers long and five kilometers wide.

They curved around as both scythes and whips.

Plus, only three of the Magino Device's nine scythes were used to create the walls. The remaining six were continuing to fire toward Kagami.

Kagami relied on the perception spell to launch her five hundred meter Device around.

She could not rely on her armor.

As for speed, her opponent could evade with spatial movements that looked like instantaneous slides. And when there was an opening, that same movement would tug at Kagami's Device.

"________"

She would sense the danger from Dikaio's trembling and she would quickly slide left and away from her opponent. Then a white wind would fly vertically through the space between them.

Mary was trying to pull her in and trap her.

This was dangerous, but Kagami still had a means of attack. So…

"Here goes!"

Mary read her opponent’s tactic.

She knew Kagami was powerful and could use seemingly unfair methods, but in this world people faced each other with the giant weapons known as Magino Devices and the battle would be determined by the damage to those Devices.

That meant Kagami would need to destroy Mary with her main cannon.

The rest was simple.

Mary just had to avoid facing her head-on. That was all.

When Kagami charged in, Mary would charge past her on the left or the right. And as soon as they were lined up alongside each other, she tore at the space along the inner edge to…

…Turn!

Macabre, the servant on her shoulder, spun around. *How cute.* Then Mary’s vision turned around, the scenery rapidly changed, and she was parallel to Kagami’s starboard side.

She fired. She pulled her in.

Kagami’s Device shook violently as it was pulled and tugged in. Its size caused an explosion of mist in the air around it. With a great sound, the drift ice on the ocean’s surface split apart.

Still, the blue and white Magino Device filled its thrusters with light and worked to pull away from Mary. It raised its tip, let the air hit it, and ascended as if riding that air.

But Mary’s cannon-fire reached her.

Two long scars raced along the great sword’s starboard armor.

Mary would not let her escape. She too began to ascend.

“I will not let you escape!”

Two magic wands fought inside the severing walls of white mist.

Kagami worked to reach the position needed to fire her main cannon and Mary pursued her to target her side. Kagami’s secondary cannons filled with noticeable light, but fragments were constantly scattering from her Device.

As if she were caught on a fishing line, Kagami ascended and descended to somehow break free. For a more flexible use of the acceleration system, Dikaiosyne partially changed form. As Mary pursued, her Device’s overall silhouette seemed squeezed in tight as it worked to eliminate air resistance.

The two Devices raced through the white dome, but Mary had the upper hand when it came to movement.

She did not have to fear the battlefield’s outer walls, so a few times, the grim reaper intentionally guided the holy knight ahead of her and then continued turning further and further out and to the left to corner her opponent.

The holy knight accelerated to escape, but…

“Kh…”

The greater her speed, the more difficult it was to turn.

While being pursued form the left, which was the inside of the turn, she could only move up or down to escape.

Meanwhile, Mary’s Magino Device took the best position. She focused her annihilation on Kagami’s secondary cannons while having herself sucked in through the gaps that created. She combined defense and propulsion into a single action.

“I have your left side, Brigadier General!”

Mary decided to not even warn her.

So she attacked. Of her nine great scythes, she continued using three to produce the barrier and used the remaining three on the right to secure Kagami.

She captured the great sword on the side.

The great sword fell into the gaps between the annihilation used against its secondary cannons.

The blue and white Magino Device briefly hopped as if drowning and then its speed matched Mary’s.

They were completely side-by-side now. All that remained was to finish this. Mary combined her three remaining scythes into a triple scythe.

“Pierce her, Ira.”

She sent it straight down at the great sword that was captured on the side.

It hit, thought Mary. The invisible blade had slammed down like a giant staple, so the great sword would be unable to resist any longer.

Then sparks of ether light scattered, but…

“She dodged it!?”

Kagami’s great sword had moved forward.

She wondered how, but the answer was right before her eyes.

The acceleration system on the back of Kagami’s Magino Device was fully opened. No, that alone would not have been enough to escape. That left…

“The main cannon!”

The recoilless system used to fire the main cannon had been pointed backwards.

…It can’t be…

The great sword had been running in a half-transformed state this whole time. What if that had not been just to increase its mobility? What if the power pathways had been connecting to reconstruct something?

…Yes, she would go that far, wouldn’t she!?

All of that had given Kagami massive instantaneous acceleration from firing the main cannon.

That would have been enough power to escape.

But, thought Mary. *She’s already right next to the outer wall and one wrong move could get the Device itself sliced into.*

“I can’t believe her!”

Sparks of ether light had just scattered from the great sword’s starboard side and they were near the outer wall of annihilation. That would suggest that wall had sliced into her, but…

“The annihilation does not create ether light sparks!”

Then what had Kagami done?

“You used your power to repair the damage my attacks had done, didn’t you!?”

Mary had to capture her quickly.

The only way was with her great scythe.

Three were creating the outer walls, three more were locked onto the secondary cannons, and the final three had been combined into a triple main cannon, but she released those three and sent them forward to capture Kagami instead.

…They made it through!

The annihilation pierced through the approximately two kilometers of space between them.

That was the perfect range to pull her in. The holy knight’s great sword lost speed as it was pulled toward the executioner’s scythe.

The rest was simple. She had already caught up to her opponent and she did not need to hold her in place any longer. She only had to swing the scythe, and…

“Pierce her, Ira!”

As soon as she shouted that, the slowed sword fired again.

But not at Mary.

…Ahead!?

And it was a blank shot that did not fire a shell.

Mary understood what Kagami had done, but her imagination could not keep up.

Kagami had turned vertically with respect to Mary.

She used the motion of her Device being tugged back while moving forward and the recoil of the cannon blast to rotate the five hundred meter Device backwards. The great sword rotated toward Mary like a blow swung from overhead.

“Kh…!”

In the instant of the rapid turn, the sword’s muzzle pointed Mary’s way.

A great noise soon followed.

The church bell-like ringing was the sound of Kagami’s sword firing its main cannon a second time.

This time it was not a blank.

An actual shell was fired for a direct hit.

The blast of power launched Dikaiosyne away.

It had not lost its forward speed.

The recoil of the cannon blast caused the Device to half rotate once more. This returned it to its original orientation, so the great sword raced along the outer wall. Mary’s Magino Device followed, but…

"So it was a direct hit!"

Due to the initial blank shot, the acceleration system had not been at full power.

…But it should have been effective against such a delicate little Magino Device!

When Kagami looked back, she saw it.

The nine scythes had ruptured in midair.

After the obvious roar of a hit…

"————"

A shockwave spread from the Magino Device in every direction.

The air was split, the clouds burst, and the drift ice bounced up.

It had been destroyed. Utterly destroyed.

"Kh…!"

Kagami had smashed her enemy, but she still put up her guard. She fired her main cannon toward the scattering Magino Device once more.

She fired again on the scattering ether light. But Dikaiosyne's cannon used physical shells. It was powerful when it hit, but it was weak against fragments like this. The shockwave spreading from its ballistic path caused the ether light to scatter even further, but…

"So it was not enough…!"

“No, it wasn’t!”

That voice was followed by a certain noise.

It was the sound of chains. A chorus of metal chains rang out as if they were racing every which way through the sky.

A moment later, the all-encompassing annihilation walls vanished, bringing into view the bright night sky of what bordered on a white night. Rather than black, the night sky was a dark blue with scarlet at the bottom. The broken field of white down below only continued to spread.

And the wind blew. The ether forming the annihilation walls became a racing wind.

It all gathered at a single point: the point of the sky where the executioner’s Magino Device had been hit and destroyed.

A grim reaper floated there. And below her feet…

“Magino Device…re-summon!”

She consumed the annihilation walls as fuel and colors of black and red instantly appeared.

The ether light had scattered and re-summoned Mary’s Magino Device.

The fact that the barrier over the Arctic Ocean had vanished was both good and bad news for Hunter and the others.

It was good news because they could see Kagami and Mary’s status now.

It was bad news because…

…The Rank 2 fed on the barrier to re-summon her Magino Device!?

Hunter had seen that girl suddenly summon her Magino Device. If she could do that, then it was hardly surprising she could instantly repair her Device after damage from Kagami's main cannon. But…

…That's really bad right now!

According to their data, Kagami's Device was damaged. Her opponent making a full recovery only made things worse.

But what can we do? wondered Hunter.

"Dammit!"

Her group could not move and Horinouchi was above the South Pole.

Just as she thought there was nothing they could do…

"Lady Hunter!"

A rectangular spell circle appeared as a window inside her communications spell circle. It displayed the troublesome glasses guy from the Horinouchi family. A maid with an eye patch stood behind him.

"I have a personal request. Is that okay!?"

"What is it? Just tell me."

"Very well." He nodded. "Please have the 7th Fleet's lunar surveillance FA-18 take off immediately. Send it toward the South Pole, and…"

The 7th Fleet was one of the fleets that America used to defend the Pacific Ocean.

They were asking to scramble one of its fighters.

“Wait, wait! You’re calling that a personal request!?”

Hunter added a “but”.

“You said immediately, right!?”

“Isn’t that what scramble means?”

The next line clinched it.

“Lady Mitsuru has found a solution.”

“Well done, Horinouchi!”

Inside the command center, Koutarou had just swung up his clenched fist to shout something, but he slowly lowered it instead.

Among the maids behind him, the Head Maid commented while giving orders by spell circle.

“Such a shame she stole your line, Head Butler.”

“Th-that’s fine! Her friend’s praise matters more than mine!”

“Very true.” The Head Maid did not bother looking his way. “And if you know how little you matter, please hurry up and finish your work.”

Hunter slapped her cheeks between her hands.

…*Okay.*

This would work. This would definitely work.

Kagami was not going to give up. Her mentality was completely insane, after all. And Horinouchi would not give up either.

“Yeah, that’s right. And that means…”

“Hold it.”

A transmission cut in. It did not display a face, but she knew who it was.

“The second in command!”

“Pipe down, Hunter. ..You, pretty boy. That’s Green Cat behind you, isn’t it?”

“Yes, sir.” The eyepatch maid replied with a naval salute. “Long time no see, Blue Bloom. My right eye has ‘seen’ this. There is no doubting it.”

“Hah. My eye can still see too. …Then we have no time. None at all. Isn’t that right? Are you prepared to hand over some information, Green Cat?”

“Yes, sir!”

“That’s fine then,” replied the second in command. “A witch’s eye can fly through the sky, but an FA-18 can’t keep up with our eyes.”

“What?” asked Hunter with a tilt of the head.

She could tell they had to hurry, but…

“A witch can’t head out to interfere with a Ranker battle and we don’t have any F-23s with us, right?”

"That just means we have to send this out."

"Eh?"

She looked around and saw a giant form riding up the deck elevator.

With a rumbling, a dark-looking craft covered in angles and flat surfaces came into view.

…That looks a lot like an F-23.

"It's a YF-22. That's the prototype that lost to the 23. …But this thing has an arresting hook built into the rear. Of course, it's meant for emergency use on land and not on a ship, but that's why I had this prototype erased from the account books for emergencies. This is the world's only YF-22 made entirely for use on ships. Our technician team likes playing with it, but it has plenty of speed. Its cruising speed is twice that of the 18. Send out a supply plane from a base in Australia and we can make up for all the chatting here and then some."

The second in command added a "look".

"You can't place many divine protections on this thing's wings. If it's going to carry someone's vision, that someone needs to have some skill of their own, Green Cat. We can't have an FA-18 bring in our lunch like we did back at the Spratly Islands. You're working with an F-23, right? We'll link with Atsugi, so move your eye over as soon as you can!"

Chapter 13

“I Won’t Let That Happen”

Wait there, you fool

Mary breathed deeply to calm her heavy breathing.

Ira was fully formed below her feet.

…So I made it in time.

She had shown Hunter this direct summoning of her Magino Device. The trick to that technique was the size of one's ether pool and the stability of their constant heat.

But there was an even more surefire way of skipping past the Normal state and forcibly summoning the Magino state.

It was to make the Magino state the foundation of one's summoning.

The witches of this world constructed a two-stage frame-style summoning to reach toward that power.

Achieving the Normal state stabilized their ether pool and the heat of their Phlogiston Heart.

However, there was no real reason that the Normal state was necessary to reach the Magino state.

Then what came next?

It was simple: you just had to keep the Magino Frame in a summonable state.

It could be done through the Normal Frame. Once the Magino Frame was in its pre-summon state, you had to "remove" the Normal Frame.

It did not need to be canceled.

You only had to remove the Normal Frame like clothing and then live your daily life like normal.

As long as you had a massive pool of ether and the requisite management skills, you could do whatever you wanted.

Mary had just used that technique.

She had re-summoned her destroyed Magino Frame.

She had not repaired it.

In the instant it was destroyed, she had allowed almost all of the ether constructing the Device to escape. And…

“The annihilation walls were useful there.”

They had been sent from the Device in the first place. During the re-summoning, she had pulled back and reabsorbed the ether the Device had held. Since it had originally been shaped by the Device’s “mold”, she had been able to summon it as if reforming it.

“Pierce her, Ira!”

She fired toward Kagami’s Magino Device right in front of her.

She used all nine scythes instead of just three.

This was Ira’s greatest annihilation.

Kagami tried to dodge. The thrusters would be too slow, so she used the main canon she had just fired repeatedly.

“…What?”

The targeting spell in her spell circle was still blacked out.

As soon as she wondered why, Dikaio produced a spell circle from her shoulder. It provided ether detection data over a radius of one hundred kilometers.

The ether density of each area was shown with a bar graph, but the bars around them were shorter than those elsewhere. And it grew progressively more so the closer it got to them.

…Is this…?

She understood. The construction of Mary's Magino Device and the repeated use of Kagami's main cannon had reduced the surrounding amount of ether. Plus, Mary had likely been acquiring and pooling the surrounding ether to maintain the annihilation barrier.

"Is this…?"

She finally understood why that barrier had not attacked her after the first time.

That first time had been a diversion. It had had another true purpose.

…Was it to reduce the amount of ether I could use for my craft ability!?

No matter what happened, Mary intended to starve her and drive her to defeat.

This strategy was tailor made for her. So…

"————"

The great scythe on the back of Mary's Magino Device had fully expanded. The reddish-purple light coming from it likely meant it had fired the main cannon meant to finish Kagami off. Which meant…

“Fine then. Come…!”

She gave voice to her expectation.

“Manko!!”

…A forbidden word!?

Mary heard a bold word shouted in the sky above the North Pole for the first time. She hoped it would also be the last time.

But her cannon had already fired. It was too late for her opponent to fire her main cannon now and this attack could reach her anywhere within her range of movement. And…

“Hit-…”

Before she could add the “her”, three colors expanded before her eyes.

It was not the blue and white of Kagami’s Magino Device. It was the navy blue and scarlet of the white night and the bluish white of the drift ice below.

…Eh?

Then her main cannon tore through empty space. But…

…She’s gone!?

Kagami and her Magino Device had vanished.

Mary seriously doubted she had fallen victim to the annihilation, so if that giant form was gone…

"Where is it?"

Just as she looked left and right, the grim reaper servant named Macabre pointed its scythe into the sky to the right.

She did not look back because she knew the location already. So…

"Dodge!"

She sent herself to the left. She slid Magino Device Ira to the side while having the entire Device turn.

That decision made all the difference.

A gust of wind blew through the area she had just vacated.

…A Magino Device main cannon!?

It did not come from Kagami's Magino Device. The girl could not yet have secured enough ether in this airspace. That meant…

"Horinouchi!"

She was there.

A vermilion and white bow-shaped Magino Device existed forward and to the right, which was technically the northeast.

There was no mistaking it. This was the Rank 3, Horinouchi, and her Magino Device, Akerindou.

Plus, Kagami's Device was visible behind that Magino Device.

Akerindou had suddenly appeared in the airspace, but…

"How!?"

Horinouchi and her Magino Device had been sent to the South Pole.

“So how did you travel all the way to the North Pole!?”

“Yesssssss! She got there! Second in command! Everyone! Thanks!”

Hunter raised her voice and both arms. She cracked her knuckles up in the air. As the sound filled the air, she checked the spell circles and saw the night sky in various places.

“Well, I’ll be. I’m pretty confident in my eyes, but I couldn’t see that at all!” said the pilot of the F-23 in Japan’s southern sky. “To think she would reopen the closed annihilation pathway and follow it in reverse!”

“Yes. I just had to open what had been closed.”

Even though she had known it was coming this time, her senses had not sorted themselves out yet.

…It hurts that my attack missed.

But she had made it here. As for how…

“Opening, unlocking, obtaining passage. It’s a common spell effect, but that’s what I used.”

It was simple in theory. Mary had created an annihilation pathway to send Horinouchi to the South Pole and Kagami and herself to the North Pole. That had closed, so Horinouchi had “opened” it once more.

Opening it was easy. It had been open already, so she only had to use an opening spell before it had settled in the closed position.

The problem had been the length of the “gate” and the time.

To reopen it, some traces of the spell had to remain, but the “gate” had been as long as half the planet’s circumference. She had been unable to comprehend the whole thing from her point of view in the South Pole.

That was why she had used American U.A.H.F.

She had used the high-speed mobile reconnaissance F-23, YF-22, and the surveillance satellites in orbit. The Horinouchi maids who excelled at ether detection abilities had placed their “sight” on those machines to scan the important points. Once Horinouchi had worked out the general shape, she had used the opening spell.

She had known how to do it.

Shinto had one of the world’s greatest opening myths.

“Ama-no-Iwato.”

When Sun Goddess Amaterasu had hidden in a rock cave out of disgust, the world had been closed up in darkness. Tricking her into opening it from within was the Shinto opening myth.

Horinouchi had been in the perpetual night of the South Pole during summer. That matched the conditions for Ama-no-Iwato, which acted as a jinx to raise the odds of the spell’s success.

Plus, her destination was the sunlit white night of the North Pole during summer. That too had acted as a jinx for the cave-opening.

But she had one secret: something else had made her think of this idea.

…Kagami…

She had seen an odd phenomenon during the morning she had first met that girl.

Something had occurred over a wide area around Yokohama, including Shihouin Academy.

Things had opened.

Every sort of door and lid had opened and apparently the more tightly sealed of the students' clothing had opened too. She had heard there was a commotion in the Special Equipment Division when some containers of dangerous materials had opened, but…

…That made me think a powerful opening spell would be able to reopen the annihilation pathway.

It had been a success.

"I did it."

"Yes. I was thinking it was about time for you to show up. You have my thanks. What would you like? Yokohama's specialties are an incredibly hard pudding and curry."

"Just so you know, the lost sweets of Tokyo are more valuable than anything from Yokohama. Things like Toraya yokan."

"I see. Then what about some Shokoku Monaka from Kinokuniya?"

That did not sound bad at all. So…

"Yes. And you can prepare enough for the maids, can't you?"

"Is it just me or did she not mention the Head Butler just now?"

"Yes… It sounded like she completely ignored him…"

"Poor Head Butler."

"Head Butler, my religious sect prevents me from eating the chestnut in the white bean paste flavor, so if I get one of those, I can secretly give it to you later."

"Th-this is fine! It means she doesn't think I need her help! I can buy my own!"

Horinouchi had a thought as she saw Kagami jot down a note in a spell circle.

…She seems to have recovered emotionally.

"Can you continue fighting?"

"I was waiting to get serious until you showed up."

Now she's said it. It really scares me that she can say things like that so easily.

But…

"Yes, I decided to call your name as a jinx to bring you here and it seems to have paid off."

Hunter heard some infighting from the sky above the North Pole.

“W-wait a second! What name did you call!?”

“Horinouchi… Please do not make me say anything so embarrassing.”

“M-Manko! You said Manko, didn’t you!? You shouted Manko at the North Pole!?”

“Ha ha ha. Hunter, Horinouchi will not stop saying it.”

Don’t drag me into this.

“We’re recording all this, you two, so pull yourselves together.”

Up above, the Atsugi F-23 that had accompanied the YF-22 partway was returning to base. Everyone raised their arms and cheered toward the plane as it roared past. There were an awful lot of witches, but that was likely to make sure they supported the Rank 3 properly.

A single line of light ran through the sky.

That ether light connected the South Pole to the North Pole.

The Rank 2 had placed it there and Horinouchi had forcibly reused it. The spell’s “mold” was collapsing, so it would be difficult to reuse again. But…

“Horinouchi! It’s time to get reckless!”

Horinouchi realized Mary had done something because the Suzaku reacted on her shoulder. As an ether creature, the servant could see Mary's annihilation, so it began shadow boxing toward some empty space.

"Kyehhhhhhhhhhhhhh!"

Oh, that actually sounded kind of bird-like. That one was safe.

"Horinouchi, was that…?"

"Safe! That one was safe!"

Oh, I'm defending it, she thought, which was kind of refreshing. *I question it myself, but I cover for it from other people's questions. I'm kind of a pain to deal with, aren't I?*

But…

"Kagami!"

She knew Mary's attack was coming and she knew this place was dangerous.

After all, the ether detection revealed that the ley lines here had grown thin and it was possible several annihilations had been set up in the air like before.

So she activated her spell.

"Cave Opening!"

The spell she threw into Akerindou's chamber took form. She used it like she was firing a blank.

"Ring out, Akerindou!!"

…This is a prayer spell!

Mary did not let down her guard when she heard the ringing of a shrine bell from Akerindou.

If Horinouchi was using her Cave Opening spell again, she was likely planning to escape along the same annihilation pathway she had arrived on. So…

“Are you running away!?”

Her question received an immediate response.

“What are you talking about?”

It was Kagami. She was using a spell behind Akerindou. She had opened a spell circle for…

…A power-boosting pressurization divine protection!?

That was a support spell used to boost other spells. If she was casting that on the Cave Opening spell…

“It can’t be…”

“Oh? You were the one that invited me on this selfish trip to see the white night. It is always nice to rediscover nature,” said Kagami. “So this time, you come with us. Come see what it is like to live in the big city. …Your teacher demands it.”

With those words, the shrine bell rang and Mary was caught in the forced transfer.

The Cave Opening spell reused the annihilation pathway to carry them away.

Hunter lined up all the data coming into her spell circle.

The situation was on the move. She no longer needed data on the poles from the bases in Australia and Canada. She sent words of thanks and sent an email to a higher up suggesting they rebuild the air force base in Iceland. Then…

“Atsugi lunar observation unit, keep going a little longer!”

After leaving and returning, they still had some hard work to do, but six FA-18s were already leaving the aircraft carrier to support the surveillance.

They were all headed toward a place filled with witches.

“Tokyo! Above Shihouin Academy!”

“They’ve appeared, Hunter!”

She could tell.

From here, she could not see the Kantou Mountains or even Mt. Fuji beyond the northern horizon, but she could see a pillar of white clouds exploding upward.

Something had appeared and stopped in the sky there at extreme speeds. She understood that all too well. After all…

“Oh, hell!”

She slammed her hands together and was well aware of the upward bend at the corner of her lips.

“I so want to join in with Hedgehog!”

Chapter 14

"I'm Made to Look Back"

Are memories
That which can be restored with anger?
Is anger
That which wells up from memories?

Kagami noticed a familiar scent in the air.

This was Tokyo Bay.

Fresh water and salt water mixed together here. The northern end was shallow and the water temperature rose easily, so the smell of water grew stronger there. The scents of the nearby shopping and industrial districts mixed in to create a unique local aroma.

That characteristic seemed to have weakened with Tokyo half-destroyed in this world, but…

“It seems the North Pole was just too clean. …Isn’t that right, Tokyo? It is nice to be back.”

She looked down to the dark water below and saw a giant school island and the moon reflected next to it.

She had been ejected as if being thrown toward that.

“Koutarou!”

Akerindou next to her turned back toward Mary’s Magino Device behind them.

“Give me the results of this scan!”

The witches of Shihouin Academy ran out of the dorms and school buildings when this battlefield appeared in the night without warning.

It was still early, so a lot of them had been eating dinner.

Most of the school buildings and dorms had lowered their explosion- and spell-resistant shutters and warnings were telling no one to go in or out, but no one obeyed those. They all moved out into the late summer night air and ran toward anywhere with a view as they listened to the cicadas and other insects chirping in the night.

Some unlucky ones were too slow and thus trapped inside the buildings, but they displayed a video feed from the broadcast committee or attempted to force their way out with spells, only causing more alarms to ring.

Regardless, they all looked up to the night sky. This did not just apply to Shihouin Academy. On the coast of Tokyo Bay, from Shinagawa to Yokohama, in Shonan, and even across most of Kantou, people opened their windows and doors to point into the sky.

“What is that!?”

It was the battle for Rank 2.

This would decide the second defender of the world, so everyone looked up into the night.

The battlefield was primarily situated at an altitude of four kilometers.

With the grim reaper’s Magino Frame at the center, the great sword and great bow took opposite sides and raced clockwise through the sky.

They revolved around it.

The grim reaper's scythe targeted and pursued the two Devices, but they kept their distance and continued firing their secondary cannons.

The three seemed to twist around above Tokyo Bay, creating wind and clouds.

The wind roared, the night roared, and the cannons and engines created an ensemble of bells and chains. The vibration tossed up spray from the water below and the trees shook their branches as if in applause.

Then the great sword took action.

It had likely decided it had the momentum it needed. While it revolved around the black scythe, it faced that Device, spun through the air, and aimed its main cannon.

"Milady, Lady Kagami and Lady Mary are placing each other in their line of fire!"

"I can see that!"

Mary had to be focusing on Kagami at the moment, so…

…How about this!?

But Horinouchi's secondary cannon shots were erased just before they collided with the black scythe Device.

She also heard Mary's voice.

"I learned my lesson yesterday!"

Mary had already corrected for the guided attack Horinouchi had sent her way from below her field of vision. She had likely placed sensors on the Device itself, but that would mean she had altered her Magino Device overnight.

…I guess she is the top of the Spell Division!

But Horinouchi recalled her discussion of strategy with Kagami and Hunter the night before. Kagami had made a certain suggestion based on her combat experience.

The girl had obeyed her great hunger by asking for another plate and she had said the following:

“Mary is controlling her annihilation spell. Do you know what that means?”

“Well, she would be controlling it, wouldn’t she?” Horinouchi had answered. “She chooses between homing or guided rounds, right? What about it?”

“You mean her interceptions aren’t set to automatically respond, right?” asked Hunter.

That had clued Horinouchi in and Kagami had nodded at that apparent understanding.

“Horinouchi, you do not have your secondary cannons automatically respond much either, do you? Is that because drawing the bowstring and firing is more your style?”

“If I set them to fire automatically, the ether consumption gets pretty ridiculous.”

Hunter had spread her mouth horizontally and muttered “Just how much power do you give those things?”, but she had decided to ignore it.

"Mary's Magino Device is most likely the same. Her annihilation spell eats up a lot of power and she could lose control if it reacts automatically. She is likely afraid of that."

"Then if they don't react automatically…"

She had recalled the lack of defenses when she had fired her attack the day before.

"That is why she did not respond to your attack from her blind spot. Simply put, that Magino Device's weakness is any attack from her blind spot."

"But she'll have a way of dealing with that tomorrow, won't she?"

"Yes," Kagami had agreed. "She will have learned that a buddy system pair can send one partner to her blind spot while she focuses on the other."

However…

"That does not change the fact that she is controlling her cannons. And those scythe cannons must fire along a certain path from their base. Even if she can react to an attack from her blind spot, her control of those bases should not be perfect. …So I will charge in early to draw those paths toward me. You record that and pierce her when you find a hole."

That had been their plan, but things had turned out differently in a good way.

…I can't believe this.

During the battle above the North Pole, Kagami had already recorded the paths of the scythes. Horinouchi had just left that scan with Koutarou and sent some extra data as well, but…

“Milady! The scan is complete! Please take this!”

“Excellent job, everyone!”

In the spell circle, Koutarou bowed and the maids cheered.

I have such wonderful allies, she thought while opening another spell circle. The information sent there showed a 3D model of Mary’s Magino Device and a spherical barrier surrounding it.

The barrier was a mesh made up of countless scythe paths. A close look showed some gaps, but…

…*They’re so narrow!*

Nevertheless, this was her job.

She had been told to snipe through those gaps, so…

“Here I go!”

Horinouchi flew forward as the Suzaku shouted on her shoulder.

She could perceive her opponent’s annihilation. Akerindou was constructed by the Suzaku servant. It had been a little Suzaku-y(?) lately, but this should still work.

It did.

In the middle of her revolution, she moved in toward her opponent and quickly circled down below. The spell circle in front of her eyes showed her the gaps in her opponent’s blind spot. Then she only needed to forcibly face upwards toward one of those.

“Kh…!”

The Suzaku gave a strange cry from her shoulder as the pressure of acceleration grew.

“Hakkeyoiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiiii!”

A sumo referee!? she wondered while making her descent. She passed down through the wind and one of Akerindou’s wind shield panels was torn away on the upper port side.

Mary was targeting her, but…

…I made it into her blind spot!

Her sights fit right into the gap between the scythes. And…

“Dodge! Horinouchi!”

What? Isn’t this her blind spot? she wondered just as she saw something.

The night sky had vanished from the ocean surface below and she saw something else instead.

…A hole?

She saw the bottom of Tokyo Bay. The water had been forcibly removed over a radius of about a kilometer.

It was the annihilation.

Mary had predicted the attack from her blind spot and made a certain decision: since she could not control the cannon bases for a precise counterattack, she would make a large scale attack over the entire area.

There was no real need to hit. Even if it was fired blind, such a large attack would include a lot of the sea and the atmosphere.

“Oh…no…”

When the annihilation spell removed a large chunk of the atmosphere, it would create a sudden air pocket. Of course, floating divine protections could deal with a vacuum, but the air current would start to suck her in.

Before she could say anything more, Akerindou vibrated as it fell into the kilometer and a half gap.

“Horinouchi!”

Hunter saw it happen as she rode atop an FA-18 conveying data from the 7th Fleet to Atsugi.

In the night sky, the vermilion and white Magino Device had fallen vertically into an air pocket and collided with the wall of atmosphere below.

Akerindou had fallen into a vacuum, but air was immediately drawn into it and the shockwave battered the Magino Device.

It was only momentary, but Akerindou still lost control. And a high level Ranker was not going to overlook that.

Mary’s Device had been pursuing Kagami, but now it turned Horinouchi’s way.

Hunter sensed it facing downward and firing an invisible blade. Three scythes combined into a single tip that was swung straight down toward Horinouchi’s Akerindou.

Mary saw her attack fired a kilometer and a half below. It instantly flew toward the great vermilion bow, but…

“A shell from the side!?”

Before her annihilation could break the bow, something broke it from a diagonal angle.

…This interception!

It was Kagami.

She had fired her main cannon on Horinouchi’s Magino Device instead of Mary.

…An excellent decision!

Mary’s spell could erase anything. It was only natural for combat, but a direct hit would have erased Horinouchi herself. So to prevent that, Kagami had chosen destruction over annihilation.

The vermilion Magino Device was broken and falling. Ether fragments were scattering from the expanded part of the bow, so it could not fire its main cannon. Mary debated whether she should fire another shot to be extra sure.

“No.”

She had a more important opponent.

“Brigadier General, you have lost sight of the situation!”

Kagami’s Magino Device was tilted downward in front of her. Its main cannon was not aimed Mary’s way.

She had chosen to save her companion rather than firing on her enemy.

Mary felt her eyebrows rising because of her thoughts concerning Kagami's action. She was comparing her own abandoned world to Horinouchi, and…

…How pathetic!

She shook off her feelings and prepared to reap that Magino Device with her main cannon. She would pierce it with the tip of the scythe and then slice it apart while pulling the scythe back.

The blue and white sword was trying to change course in midair. It was trying to use the recoil of the cannon blast to slide back and to the right.

But it was too slow. Mary had already fired her annihilation.

It hit.

Mary saw her shot score a direct hit.

…I hit!

That was to be expected given her position and the distance.

The close range made it a quick shot and the explosion of wind enveloped it after the fact. White clouds raced along the curving path and struck Kagami's sliced Magino Device.

The following shockwave sent the shards of the Magino Device scattering through the sky. The collision of wind broke and shattered the sliced areas.

"I did it…"

She had finally pierced it. Her annihilation blade had finally reached the target of her grudge.

It had been a solid hit. It had seemed a little anticlimactic, but a single hit from her attack was enough. This was just how it was when it hit.

But then she saw a white and blue sword rising beyond the wind and scattering fragments.

"…What?"

She had pierced it, she had sliced it, and she had scored a direct hit. So why?

"It wasn't a direct hit!?"

It was half destroyed. The port side of the blade cannon's outer armor was split and scattering, but the barrel itself was unharmed.

…Impossible.

You could not hope for someone to miss at such close range. No, it simply could not happen. Which meant…

"Macabre!?"

The servant was trembling on her shoulder. A spell circle appeared to show her the bottom of Magino Device Ira.

She could not see that area on her own and something was stabbed into the three-scythe structure there.

It was an arrow. An arrow-style ether shell had been fired from directly below.

"Akerindou's shell!"

She could see the great vermilion bow aimed up at her from far below, almost to the ocean.

However, that entire Device should have been destroyed by Kagami earlier.

But it had not been.

She did not know why, but Akerindou had fully recovered. The bent base, the bow shape, and the wings needed for flight and stabilization were all back. Everything was back to normal.

"…"

The second main cannon shot tore into a gap in Ira's structure, but then pierced straight through.

…That Magino Device has a lot of gaps!

Akerindou's structure also had a lot of empty space, but Mary's bundle of scythes had so many gaps that one could see through to the other side.

However, Horinouchi could fire now.

"Honestly." Hunter sent a transmission after descending to the Special Equipment Division in her Normal Frame. "I can't believe you would use a cannon blast to do the kind of Frame restoration I did."

"We are high level Rankers, you know? This was safer than what we did in our battle against you."

The shell Kagami had fired earlier had not been a normal shell.

"She fired a spell shell rather than a physical one. It temporarily destroyed Akerindou, but I was able to capture the shell's ether with my willpower and use it to repair Akerindou."

They were no longer inside the Arctic Ocean barrier with such thin ether density. Partially due to being in Shihouin Academy's territory, the sky above Tokyo Bay had excellent ley line flow. It had been easy for Kagami to secure and form a shell out of enough ether to guide Horinouchi to recovery.

She could tell Mary was looking down at her from the edge of her Magino Device.

Horinouchi simply looked back up at her and made the appropriate announcement.

"There are some tactics you can only use when you have a partner."

Then she fired repeatedly.

Mary felt Ira shake from the repeated direct hits of the main cannon below her.

To intercept, she swung down three scythes, but she realized one of them would not move properly.

It had been hit.

As she quickly sent down one from another section, another one stopped functioning.

"Kh…!"

Two was good enough. Including the previous hit, she could not use three of them now.

She used the remaining one to respond to Kagami's attack.

"I can't let this happen! If I lose, everything I lost will be-…!"

But then she saw Kagami's Magino Frame finally aiming her way and firing its main cannon.

"Ohhhh!"

She sent the remaining three scythes forward and devoured Kagami's main cannon blast, but…

"You're mine!"

She reacted on reflex to that announcement from below. She could see Kagami in front of her, but she could check on Akerindou's position in her memory. So…

…There!

She annihilated the three flying main cannon blasts as if reeling them in.

She devoured them. Three splits appeared in the air and she felt her interceptions hit.

…Calm down!

Akerindou was aiming vertically up at her. Horizontal movement would be difficult like that, so she could predict the girl's line of fire. Even if she was in her blind spot…

"I can still deal with you!"

"Oh, is that so?"

She heard a voice.

“Time for three more shots.”

As soon as she heard that, she swung the three lower black scythes. She sent their full power straight down. The triple blade had enough power to annihilate both the shells and Akerindou.

Mercy and logic no longer mattered. She would simply erase everything in her way. So…

“Be…”

She never managed to say “gone”.

Three main cannon blasts struck Ira’s port side.

Mary heard the three scythes on Ira’s port side being pierced through and utterly destroyed.

Those collections of attack power used their tips to pierce and then sent a great impact across the whole.

However, the three arrows had not come from below.

They had flown from the southern sky.

“I can’t be…”

“But it is,” replied a voice.

It came from below. It was indeed the shrine maiden controlling the great vermilion bow that answered.

“Did you think all I did was take penguin photos when you sent me to the South Pole? After making plans for the next battlefield, I just had to fire from there. And…yes, I have one lesson for an outsider like you.”

"Tokyo is a scary place."

Three shots from below and three more from the south struck Ira.

Vibrations, fragments, and impacts burst vertically toward heaven. And above that, Mary saw something.

The great sword with the half-destroyed blade was charging tip-first toward her.

The hits continued. The scythe was half shattered. She could not fight back or move, but she did use one remaining blade.

"Stay back!"

She sliced the upper armor of the great sword. That was because an arrow from below had sent Ira's tip hopping up.

As Ira floated up as if from an uppercut, something collided with its starboard side.

The great Sword's broken blade had stabbed into Ira's tip with just its unharmed lower portion. And…

"Fire!"

A main cannon blast from point-blank range struck Ira and the connecting arch that supported it.

Koutarou sent Horinouchi the footage from an F-23 that had begun flying around Tokyo Bay. She was still firing her main cannon, but that was to prevent the annihilation from being aimed Kagami's way.

After all, a battle had begun atop the enemy Magino Device.

…Honestly.

Kagami had jumped down from her Magino Device and approached Mary atop the great scythe.

She had desired a clash and gone in for hand-to-hand combat.

“She really is stupid…”

Horinouchi honestly thought that, but there was no helping it. She also thought the same thing about herself.

The footage showed the two girls fighting with sparks flying everywhere. Mary’s Magino Device was unlikely to hold up for much longer, but those two did not stop each other in this battle of willpower atop it.

“Idiot.”

But, she thought. *Go do it.*

“If you aren’t going to tell her, then you have to do this, Kagami.”

Yes. After their discussion of strategy the night before, they had left sleepy Hunter to doze off and they had discussed something.

“That was…”

It was about the destruction of a world that had been lost.

Chapter 15

“Look At That”

Don’t act tough
Don’t act weak
Forcing a smile
Only brings pain

Kagami recalled something during her swordfight with Mary. She recalled two things: the world she had told Horinouchi about the night before and the world she had actually visited and been indebted to.

The night before, she had rested her elbow on the table and started speaking.

“About that world…”

“I’m listening.”

She had been thankful for that girl’s clear prompting, so she had taken a breath.

“The director who led that world knew that there was no saving that world even with me there.”

In other words…

“I was too late.”

Horinouchi had said nothing when Kagami went on to say that was just an excuse.

It did not matter what others thought. It mattered what she thought. So…

“I’ll listen until you can convince yourself.”

“I thank you,” she had said quietly. “Despite that fact, I was asked to help because I could probably delay the end.”

“Then the reason you fled before the end was…”

“Yes.” Kagami had nodded. “The director knew my situation and asked me to go, lest I be too late for the other worlds.”

Kagami had hung her head and covered her face.

After a while, she had continued.

“Then again, I was too late for all the worlds before that too.”

“B-but that isn’t your fault!”

“Thank you.”

Kagami had raised her head and smiled.

That may have been why Horinouchi had stood from her seat and placed a hand on Kagami’s cheek.

“Have you shed that many tears already?”

“It seems to be something I cannot get used to.”

“Then,” Horinouchi had said. She had removed her hand from the cheek and embraced her own body to have somewhere to place the hand. “What did you do after that?”

“To make a long story short, I fled.”

“I can’t go with you, you know?”

“That is just being cruel.” Kagami’s shoulders had shaken a little and she had sighed. “The director said everyone else would escape too, but I had my doubts. That world’s transfer gate was poorly made and I doubted it could send more than me and one other person through.”

“You mean…?”

“The director told me not to worry because my student would be sent through first and that we should work together to one day defeat my sister.”

"Lady Kagami." Koutarou had asked a question from the counter. "I know this is rude, but if I might ask a question. …If you had met Lady Mary before Lady Mitsuru, would you have made her your partner?"

…Uuh…

You're pretty perceptive, Koutarou, Horinouchi had briefly thought. Yes, only briefly.

"Head Butler! My foresight as a witch is telling me someone is insulting you!"

"Throw out that foresight and get back to work!!"

Horinouchi had listened to Kagami answering Koutarou's question.

"No."

She remembered thinking *Oh?*, but was that accurate? Or was she only hiding her relief? However, she did know what Kagami had said.

"We would have been enemies just like now."

"Why? If you told Mary what you just told me…"

"Mary's reality is Mary's reality. If I tell her my truth and make excuses, it will mean I did not accept her reality."

Kagami had said "listen" and faced Horinouchi.

"I am a visitor in all worlds. And…if I were to apologize to her, I would be insulting the director's and the others' concern for me."

"But…"

Horinouchi had fallen silent.

She had wanted to say that put too much of a burden on her. And that may have been why Hunter had gotten up from the sofa and joined the conversation.

"You're such an idiot."

She had laughed bitterly and collapsed back onto the sofa as she continued.

"But I like idiots."

Horinouchi had nearly nodded and said "so do I", but she had swallowed the words.

That had happened last night and long ago.

Horinouchi knew the truth, but Kagami would not tell Mary. That was Kagami's right, so Horinouchi and Hunter could not butt in. But even so…

"Kagami! Win this!"

She had her own thoughts on what Mary had said during this battle.

"No one will bless a world saved by a grudge!"

…That's right.

She was the same. Most likely, Hunter and most of the other witches were too. After what had happened ten years ago, everyone had a grudge against the Black Witch. But…

"We aren't fighting to take revenge for what was lost! We're fighting to prevent any more loss! Isn't that right, Kagami!?"

Mary gasped at the voice she heard through the gaps in the cannon-fire. She continued her swordfight with Kagami.

…I know that.

She did. She knew that world's end had already arrived.

While entrusting the world to her, the director and the others had known how much of a burden it would be.

That was why they had said nothing about her teacher.

At the time, she had not understood because she had been a child. She had not understood that girl had passed through many worlds and she had not understood that meant their world was nothing special and she was just a visitor there.

But Mary understood all that now.

"Yes, that's right!"

Beyond the sparks, her teacher said nothing. She simply received or dodged Mary's blade while making definite and skilled attacks of her own.

She remained silent.

Mary understood why she would do that.

Mary was wailing over the destruction of her world, but the opponent before her had been involved in many worlds before that and then seen them all destroyed.

“Why…!?” she asked, searching for an answer from that silence. “Why!?”

She recalled the sword training she had received long ago.

“Why did you appear before me again!?”

Kagami deflected the strike and responded.

“You have grown, Reese, warrior of the May clan. And I see you have made friends.”

“What are you talking about!?”

“The director told me you had trouble making friends. But it seems things are different in this world.”

“What are you talking about?”

Her teacher smiled.

“This is what that world wanted for you. …And it is something I could not teach you or grant you,” she said. “So you were not wrong, Mary.”

In the spell circle footage, Horinouchi saw the two of them stop moving atop the crumbling Magino Frame.

But after a few breaths, Mary suddenly took action.

“Ahhh!”

She raised her triple scythe toward Kagami.

"Milady!"

"Shut up!"

The maids did not even try to stop Koutarou as he went limp and collapsed to the side like a felled tree.

He then rolled down the steps, crashed into the wall, and began humming a sad song, but he recovered once he heard some of the witches tending to their equipment.

Horinouchi saw Mary swing her weapon.

That weapon was turned toward Kagami, but it did not reach her.

Mary slammed her scythe blade into her own Magino Device.

With a solid sound, cracks ran through the Magino Device's armor. And…

"Ahhhhhh!"

Mary bent over, placed her forehead against the scythe, and cried.

"I…I can't stand it anymore…!"

The grim reaper hid her face in her hood as she shouted.

"It would be so much easier if I could get rid of all this destruction, this doubt, this grudge, and myself!"

The tall girl slowly fell to her knees.

“They entrusted the world with me, but what am I supposed to do!? I’m not as strong as you! I was only chosen because I had a bit of power!”

So…

“What am I supposed to do!?”

“Stand, Mary Sue.”

Kagami spoke calmly.

“Stand up, Mary.”

Mary asked a question to that familiar form standing with the moon behind her.

“Stand up…and do what?”

“Well,” replied her teacher. “Live as you like and die as you like.”

“But the Black Witch is in this world…”

“Manko and I will defeat her.”

A spell circle from Horinouchi immediately appeared, but her teacher quickly folded it up and put it in her pocket.

“Now.”

“Sh-shouldn’t you answer that?”

“It can wait.”

Mary sensed some killer intent from below, so was that really okay? Then her teacher spoke with an air of “at any rate”.

"Mary, you only need to live. Simply do that and everyone else will live on with you."

And…

"There was something I was unable to tell when I had you buy me those drinks last night."

"Ah…"

That was true. Mary had cut her off and left, but…

"I am grateful that you are alive."

Her teacher smiled.

"And let me add one more thing."

Now…

"Live, Mary Sue. You can run away or give up if you want, but make sure you live."

She held out her hand, but Mary only stared at it.

"————"

And she stood. She did not take that hand. She used her own two feet. That was her answer. After all…

"I've grown up, Brigadier General."

"Enough to stand on your own, at least."

Her teacher smiled and pulled back her hand. Mary's shattering anger rose into the sky as light around them.

She breathed out and more tears spilled from her eyes.

"Do not cry. …You stood up, didn't you?"

"This is the last time."

It was already over. She had not lost anything. It was simply over.

And that brought some words to her lips.

"I'll be heading back."

"Where to? No, look carefully."

"Eh?" she replied.

She looked back and found Ira had fallen far enough to see Shihouin Academy.

She saw the artificial island's coast, the academy grounds, and the building rooftops.

"Ah…"

People and her classmates were there and raising both arms.

Mary belatedly heard their cheers.

"Mary."

Mary heard her teacher's voice just as the cheering voices below realized she had looked back their way.

"Ohhhhh!"

She heard voices saying "well done", "great job", and "you put up a good fight".

The ones asking her to hurry on down were probably her classmates. But her teacher had more to say.

"If this surprises you…then you must not have noticed. You were not alone in this world. You had all these people with you."

"…!"

The witches gave welcoming cheers from the pier and the rooftops.

She even saw a picture of Macabre made with illumination spells on the Spell Division rooftop.

"Yes," said the teacher behind her. "If you had noticed this, I doubt we would have won. …The warriors of that world could draw out their greatest strength when they had something to protect."

"Then…"

"There is no reason to hesitate," said her teacher. "You have a home here, Mary."

She nearly agreed, but she swallowed the words. She was not that obedient. But there was no point in denying the truth before her eyes, so she nodded as if to convince herself.

She then said one last thing to those cheers.

"I'm on my way back."

She said it clearly and this time she did not look back.

She sure is popular, thought Horinouchi as she watched the two Magino Frame's scattering after canceling her own Frame and returning to her uniform.

Mary flew down toward the Spell Division rooftop and all the cheers there.

The praise mostly came from how little anyone knew about her as a Ranker and the impressive fight she had put up leading to her defeat. Even greater cheers surrounded her as she descended.

Meanwhile…

“Idiot.”

Kagami must have been exhausted because her Frame came apart in midair.

“Ah.”

Horinouchi saw her fall into the ocean beyond the pier.

She contacted Hunter and had the Special Equipment Division send out a boat to rescue her. She decided to wait at the pier’s mooring area. That soaking-wet idiot would eventually be standing before her with a smile, so what was she to do then?

Should she scold her first? Or…

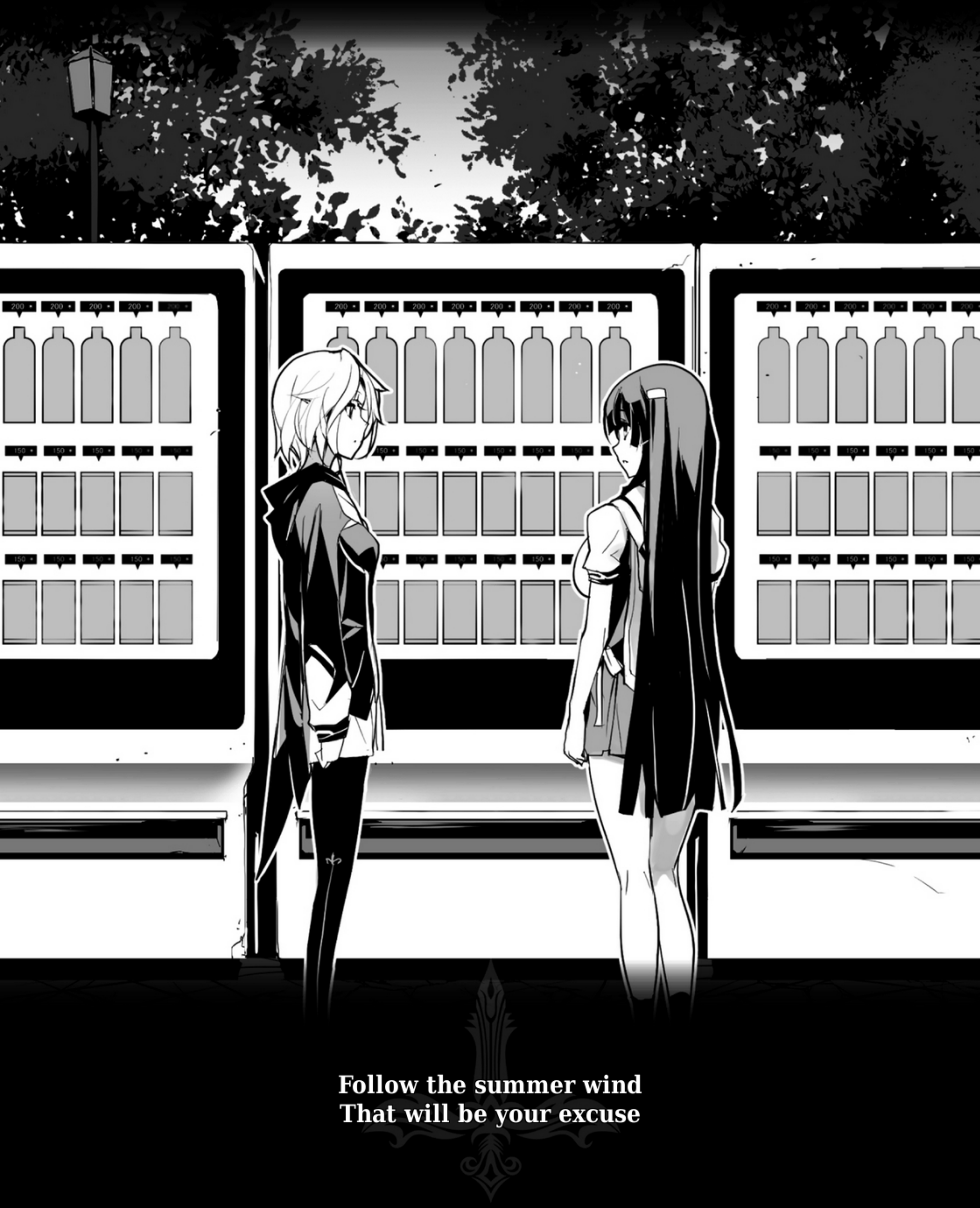
“Aren’t you glad?”

She said that now, but she would never say it later.

Once the dawn came, summer would be over. The moon was visible in the sky, but their days as the Rank 2 would begin tomorrow.

Final Chapter

“Summer is Over”



Follow the summer wind
That will be your excuse

Summer is over, thought Mary.

The days were still hot, but the heat no longer lingered inside her clothes. The air was simply hot with low humidity and it would then become a wind.

Three days had passed since the end of the Ranker battle.

Everyone had already forgotten the excitement of that day and returned to their normal lives. She too had returned to her normal life with the questions from the PR Committee as the only lingering effect.

It was lunchtime.

Her usual friends had started something on the roof, so she had gone to buy some drinks.

She chose the same courtyard vending machines as before. Walking there without using any noticeable spells took less than two minutes.

She soon arrived in that clearing with the mausoleum hill to the north. She approached the row of vending machines, but found a familiar person there.

…Horinouchi Manko…

She was pretty sure that was her name. She could have sworn she had heard it was Mitsuru, but this must have been her true name. Some magic required speaking the target's name, so perhaps a forbidden name that one could not carelessly say out loud was a defense against that. The Horinouchi family was frightening indeed.

At any rate, she stood next to the girl who was audibly pondering what to buy and she too began to think.

“Oh?”

When Horinouchi noticed her, she nodded.

“Excuse me.”

And she decided she might as well say something else.

“Could you buy me some drinks to make up for before?”

Before? wondered Horinouchi until she realized what Mary meant.

…Sh-she’s referring to that night, isn’t she!?

Kagami had taken an awful long time to get some drinks, but Horinouchi had never imagined the girl had made their opponent buy her the drinks.

…You have to tell me things like that!

Horinouchi did not like being indebted to anyone, so she decided to pay off this debt.

“How many?”

“Four.”

She was surprised to find that Mary’s immediate reply lacked the harshness from before.

As the Shinto representative and a shrine maiden, Horinouchi would perform ritual prayers. She sensed no ill will in Mary’s voice, so she decided she was safe. And so she held up her card.

"That's fine. Go ahead."

"Thank you very much."

Mary bowed and pressed four buttons. Horinouchi approved each payment on her card, but after Mary grabbed the fourth drink…

"Sorry, but one more."

"Eh? Oh, that's fine?"

…Is there some point to this time-delay attack?

She could guess that Kagami had done that to Mary the other night. In that case, she was obligated to fill in for Kagami here.

But then she saw the fifth can Mary took.

"That can…"

"Yes, it's milk."

The girl seemed to like black, so Horinouchi had expected her to choose the squid ink barley tea or the health asphalt tea. But if she was choosing milk…

"Do you have a cat?"

"No, someone once told me that drinking milk would help me grow tall."

Why was it she could guess who had told Mary that?

…And I guess that means they had milk in that other world.

Was that a mistake in the setting or was there a reason for it? She did not know, but if they bought milk like that there too…

"Toh."

She bought one more drink and Mary glared at her.

What's this? she wondered as Mary pointed at the can she pulled from the vending machine.

"You should quit drinking the carbonated ones."

"Oh, this isn't for me."

"Then who is it for?"

"Well," she cut in to answer. "For Kagami."

"Oh."

Mary nodded, paused for three seconds, and suddenly glared at the vending machine.

"Sh-she told me not to drink those…!"

Why was it Horinouchi could imagine both the other world and current world sides of that story?

When did I fall for her trap!? angrily wondered Mary. But…

…Well, it is true I grew tall…

The fact that she began searching for ways to calm her anger made her think, "Oh, I'm a fairly convenient person, aren't I?"

Then she heard a bitter laugh next to her.

"If you like, come join us. We're just enjoying ourselves without being too formal."

"But the Brigadier General…"

"She's sitting there without worrying about any of that."

Mary understood that girl enough to say, “I suppose she would be…”

But there was more to the Brigadier General than that.

“She will eventually-…”

“I know.”

Horinouchi turned toward the General Division dorm as if to avert her gaze.

“She is a companion, but also a visitor. No matter how this turns out, she will eventually leave. But…”

“But?”

On her prompting, Horinouchi continued.

“If you think about what you will lose or have lost, you lose sight of what’s important. …Your time to think about things is finite too, so I want to think about the important here and now more than about what will be or has been lost.”

Horinouchi recalled her mother as she spoke.

She also remembered what Kagami had said on that sunset pier and everything that had happened since.

She would not forget about her mother, but there were some things she had now specifically because it was the present. And so she spoke.

“You asked why she appeared before you again, didn’t you?”

“That was…”

That could likely be called destiny, but if she was going to describe it using the visible phenomena…

“Everyone comes across losses and meetings like that. So when I meet someone, I want to treat it with the importance it deserves.”

She waved goodbye and left Mary.

She was grateful that the girl remained motionless. That meant she only had to leave as quickly as possible so Mary would not notice something. After all…

…Wh-why am I giving my approval for everything that’s happened with Kagami!?

Momentum is a frightening thing, she concluded.

“Head Butler! Lady Mitsuru just left Lady Mary while blushing!”

“What!? Blushing!? Did she shame her in some way!? Like by saying her name over and over!?”

“That isn’t her name, Head Butler! Correct your memories!”

Mary watched Horinouchi leave.

…She is a considerate person.

Having a name like that must have given her a difficult life. And it was often said a difficult life helped people grow up.

“How admirable…”

She bowed toward the departing figure and then started back toward the Spell Division dorm.

Despite walking away from Horinouchi, she felt oddly like she had not turned her back on her.

It just felt like she was walking in a different direction. Like she would see her again tomorrow.

…*Next time…*

What would she do? Next time, next time, next time…

“_____________”

She thought and failed to find an answer, but she suddenly found herself back at the Spell Division dorm’s roof.

As usual, a few groups were researching spells. The latest fad was searching for directions of good luck. It seemed to have been started by that moment when they had seemingly vanished during the previous Ranker battle.

They were likely trying to find a way not to lose sight of them next time. But…

“Mary!”

A classmate spread her arms in front of a spell circle floating just barely off the floor.

“We’re freezing things with a spell! Do you want a lemon or a melon!?”

“A melon.”

She answered, passed out the drinks, and then sat in the circle with the others.

They all raised their voices when she did.

She found the impressed voices puzzling, but they were already opening their drinks and having a toast. One of them held her can up toward Mary.

“This is the first time you chose to sit in our circle. We need to celebrate.”

“Eh? But I always sit with you…”

“I said chose to.”

“Look.” Another pointed to the edge of the roof. “You always sit on the edge there, listlessly staring out at the restored city.”

“Well, this might just be on a whim, but at least you know that isn’t the only spot for you.”

Once they pointed it out, it did seem odd. It was true she had thought of that as her spot before, but for some reason she no longer felt that way.

Freedom was nice.

So…

“Does that mean I’m free now?”

“Don’t overthink this. You always overthink things.”

“I know, right?” said someone else. “Anyway, we’ll always make sure there’s a spot in the circle for you.”

“And if no one’s here, just sit down and someone’ll be here before long. …Only afterschool, though.”

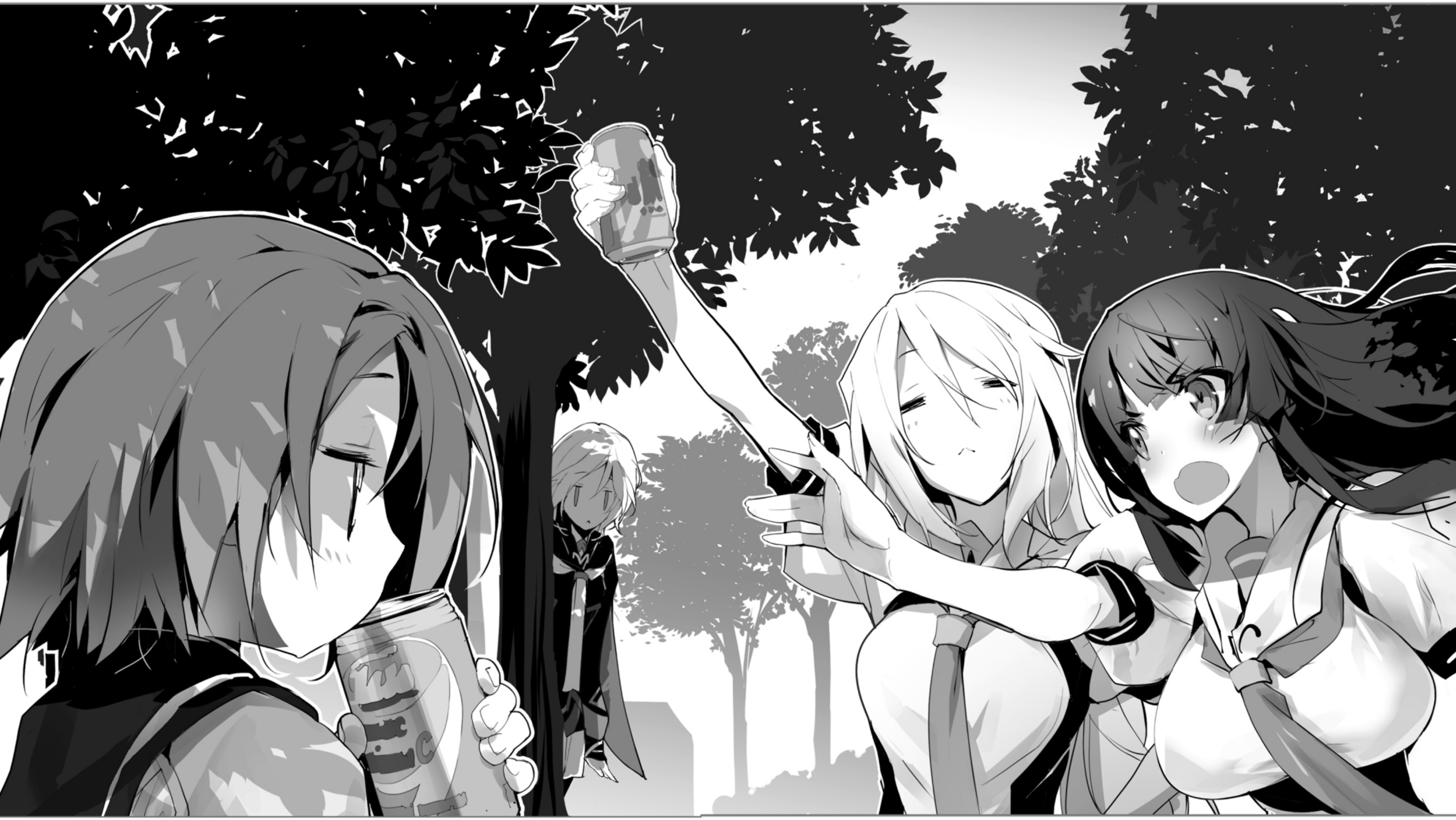
She nodded.

“Yes.”

Then they all smiled bitterly.

“Don’t cry, Mary.”

I’m not crying, she thought. *I’m happy.*



Aren’t you glad?

Afterword

And that was Clash of Hexennacht Volume 2. This is running at the magazine serialization rate, so it’s getting published really quickly. It and Tsurugi-san’s manga version are continuing with a focus on plot progression, so please keep following it.

This volume included the area from the western coast of Tokyo Bay to Shonan, but that region is interesting because its atmosphere seems to change every few years.

A lot of it comes down to a “for better or for worse” standpoint, but I had it be one of the restored regions because if that strong sense of vitality.

When I used to go to Yokohama, I would always buy illustrated versions of China’s Journey to the West and Romance of the Three Kingdoms in order and it was fun to have them all together. That really takes me back.

Yokohama looks a lot different these days, but I was glad to see those wildly oversized nikuman are still sold in the Chinatown there.

Now for the chat.

“Do you have anything to talk about regarding magical girls?”

“Hmm. I’ve always wondered what the Minky in Minky Momo means.”

“Doesn’t it mean ‘like a mink’? Not that a mink coat seems like it would be much of a defense.”

“Don’t mix them together. And Minky isn’t in the dictionary… I bet it’s a Tomino name meant to hide that her real name’s Haman.”

“Don’t mix them together. And that’s a different studio. …But do you have anything else?”

“Besides Minky, there was Creamy, Fairy, Magical, Pastel, and Fancy.”

“Minky’s uniqueness really stands out among those. …I wonder why.”

“I dunno. But now that I think about it, the second one stands out at as the only food.”

“I pulled out my dictionary just to check and Creamy means ‘smooth like cream’.”

“That sounds pretty inappropriate if you ask me. And in that case, why not just go with Milky?”

“Hey, Fujiya.”

“Oh, yeah! There’s that eternally young witch sticking her tongue out, isn’t there!?”

Yeah, she’s pretty much invincible.

Anyway, the background music this time was The Story from Taito’s Rastan Saga II. It’s a pretty cool muscular barbarian song. I recommend the arcade version. And this time I’ll end it with this:

“Who was searching for a home the most?”

Next up will probably be the main Horizon novel.

September 2015. The morning of an approaching typhoon.

-Kawakami Minoru